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Milton Aspiring: Belief, Influence, and Shakespeare

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Milton Aspiring: Belief, Influence, and Shakespeare

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In memory of Joseph Donald Moore, 1943-2009.

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Milton Aspiring: Belief, Influence, and Shakespeare

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Abstract: Over the last several hundred years, literary criticism has paid generous attention to the works of John Milton and his greatest and, in space and time, closest predecessor, William Shakespeare. However as Alwin Thaler observed almost a century ago, "strangely enough . . . it has neglected the relationships between them." Exploring the literary, ideological, and political reasons for that neglect, this dissertation searches out the ways that Shakespeare influenced Milton and, more specifically, how that influence contributed to the young Milton's self-fashioning of the poetic identity he desired for himself: to be the *vates* poet of the English people. The influence of Shakespeare on the young Milton exemplifies a certain version of imitation that G.W. Pigman III has termed "dissimulative," expanding on common notions of influence, particularly when authors with seemingly disparate approaches to their art still draw from one another in a way that is intentionally difficult to detect, however powerful.

Each of the four chapters offers a reading of one of Milton's early poems alongside one or more germane works by Shakespeare never before been read in the context of Milton's early poetic development. Chapter 1 explores the two authors' competing metaphysical notions of time by reading Milton's mid-winter birth poem, *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*, hereafter referred to as the Nativity Ode, alongside

Shakespeare's play set around the "Festival of the Epiphany," *Twelfth Night: Or, What You Will.* Chapter 2 explores the two authors' competing notions of language, how it works and what it should do, by reading Milton's *A Masque to be Presented at Ludlow Castle*, hereafter referred to as *Comus*, alongside *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Measure for Measure.* Chapter 3 explores the young Milton's notions of poetic fame, the proper social role of the poet, and opposing approaches to employing poetry as a means to immortality by reading *Lycidas* alongside a selection of Shakespeare's sonnets. The final chapter states a never-before suggested claim about Milton's early verses "On Shakespeare," namely that the young poet's work contains layers of irony: while praising and imitating, Milton is also obliquely criticizing his latest and greatest predecessor.

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INTRODUCTION:

The Problem of Being Milton

> Although much has been made in literary histories of the link between Milton and Spenser, we need to insist on the relative unimportance of that link. Milton was not unduly perturbed, surely, by the example of *The Faerie Queene*. Milton perceived the problem of being Milton: it was that he came after Shakespeare. (Fletcher 142-43)[1]

Everywhere in Milton studies, references to Shakespeare are either conspicuously cursory or altogether absent. As Alwin Thaler observed almost a century ago, "[s]cholarship has always delighted to render unto Shakespeare and Milton individually the tribute which is their natural due. Strangely enough, however, it has neglected the relationships between them" (139). Notwithstanding the work of Thaler, who noted that Shakespeare made "deep impression upon the heart" of Milton's "poetic fancy in youth" (39), this critical hole still gapes wide open.[2] Such is the territory this project sets out to explore.

In her lengthy biography of Milton, Barbara K. Lewalski hardly mentions Shakespeare at all; the roughly 700-page volume deals with Milton's first poem printed

[1] Exploring the link between Milton and Shakespeare, I find the link between Milton and Spenser plays a prominent role in the early development of Milton's poetry less for his style and more for his ideas about the social role of the "true poet" as one with prophetic powers. It was not so much Spenser's poetic style Milton followed; it was Spenser's outlook on what poetry should do and how the poet should live that motivated Milton to call Spenser, as reported by Dryden, his "original." Shakespeare, however, was Milton's English predecessor with the most intimidating level of talent.

[2] Scholars often point out, in the words of David Hawkes, the "remarkable fact that both the towering geniuses of early modern English literature, Shakespeare and Milton, were the sons of usurers," and both became usurers themselves, "capitalists living at the dawn of capitalism" (28).

in English, 16 lines entitled "On Shakespeare" (41), in a single paragraph.[3] Writing on "Milton and his Precursors," Harold Bloom notes that Milton's "highly deliberate and knowingly ambitious program necessarily involved him in direct competition" with other poets, listing "Homer, Virgil, Lucretius, Ovid, Dante, and Tasso," and "[m]ore anxiously, it brought him very close to Spenser" (163). But he ignores Shakespeare. Discussing the language of *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, Alan Rudrum observes that "for the most part Milton's language in these poems is derivative, from Shakespeare principally," but he says little else about the matter, save that "indeed a good exercise would be to see how many [Miltonic] words and phrases we can refer to Shakespeare" (27-28). In his book of essays about the two poets, Fredson Bowers never writes a word concerning the relation between them. James Holly Hanford mentions Shakespeare four times in his Milton biography, each time in passing; for example, he notes that Milton's Satan is the "conscious and determined villain, reminding us of Shakespearean characters—Macbeth, Iago, Richard III" (186). However, he goes no further. In books with titles that include both poets' names, a general tendency keeps the two separate, sectioned off from one

[3] Lewalski joins the chorus of scholars who claim Milton "explicitly claims the Bard as his model" (41). However, like most who broach the topic of the relation between these two literary giants who were also near contemporaries, she says remarkably little. Reading "On Shakespeare," Neil Forsyth noticed the poem "shows a great respect, as the context requires, for Shakespeare, but also a certain need to establish distance, for this newly arriving poet to carve out some space for himself" (30-33). He ultimately argues that in his youth, Milton was influenced by Shakespeare, but that while we still see traces of Shakespeare in the poet's later works, he ultimately grew out of it. Hawkes notes in passing that "On Shakespeare" expresses Milton's "lifelong iconoclasm." Yet no one, so far as I know, has rendered a close reading of "On Shakespeare" that pays attention to this iconoclastic tendency noted by Hawkes, or to the creation of distance noted by Forsyth. Such will be the intention of Chapter 4: "'Too Much Conceiving': A New Reading of Milton's 'On Shakespeare.'" All citations of Milton's poetry will refer to Kerrigan, Rumrich, and Fallon's *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton.* New York: Modern Library, 2009.

another almost entirely.[4] Perhaps Thaler is right to note the "strangeness" of this critical omission; indeed, this gap calls attention to itself, provokes a lot of curiosity, and prompts us to ask: What was Milton's attitude toward Shakespeare, and why is it so commonly overlooked?

Scholarly answers to this riddle have come roughly numbered three: one seems to grow from Dryden's famous claim that "Milton has acknowledg'd to me that Spenser was his original" (A), thus detracting attention away from Shakespeare's influence on Milton. This view suggests the latter poet's indifference or, at best, very small debt to the former, as if Milton more or less ignored Shakespeare.[5] Emphasizing Milton's originality, Samuel Johnson contributed to this view by insisting that Milton was "naturally a thinker for himself, confident of his own abilities, and disdainful of help or hindrance: he did not refuse admission to the thought or images of his predecessors, but he did not seek them. From his contemporaries he neither courted nor received support" (61). William Hazlitt remarked that in reading Milton "we feel ourselves under the influence of a mighty intellect, that the nearer it approaches to others, becomes more distinct from them" (58). With regard to Milton's literary relationship to Shakespeare, this observation of Milton's distinction turns out to be true; the closer he approached his latest and greatest

[4] Two admirable exceptions to this tendency can be found in Erin Minear's *Reverberating Song in Shakespeare and Milton: Language, Memory, and Musical Representation*, and Paul Stevens' *Imagination and the Presence of Shakespeare in* Paradise Lost. Minear explores the ways Milton drew from Shakespeare's enchanting musicality, and Stevens argues that Shakespeare furnished Milton with useful conceptual structures that Milton put to use in creating his great epic.

[5] I still have yet to see where anyone has come right out and said this explicitly, but such thinking is implied by the lack of investigations of Shakespeare's influence on Milton alongside the abundance of work on Spenser's.

predecessor, the more distinct from him he became, until he reached a point at which the two begin to seem all but unrelated.[6]

The next and most common answer contends that Milton adored Shakespeare, adopting him as a model for his own rich poetic style.[7] This traditional reading, many times rendered throughout the years, has reached the status of a consensus. Most biographies of Milton note that, in the words of Lewalski, "Milton's widow Elizabeth mentioned Cowley with Spenser and Shakespeare as the English poets Milton 'approved most'" (446). David Masson perhaps took this view a bit too far when he called Milton's poem "On Shakespeare" an act of "Shakespeare worship," stressing that "[t]o this day, I repeat, there is no nobler expression of Shakespeare-enthusiasm in our language than this from Milton" (1.332). Noticing that it had to be more complex than that, Hanford affirms "Milton's admiration for Shakespeare is sincere, in spite of the implied reservations of other passages in his works" (147). Though he does not address these "implied reservations," it seems Hanford was right to note that mixed with Milton's admiration for his great predecessor—which I will not deny—was a certain degree of disagreement.

A third perspective would amplify these "reservations," and has it that the young poet bore an antagonistic relationship to his precursor, in the theoretical tongue of Harold Bloom, an "agon," seeing the young poet as engaged in a struggle to overcome his

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[6] One has to imagine it would have thrilled Milton to know that someday there will be 400 years worth of scholarship on his work and so few volumes about the ways his poetry was influenced by Shakespeare.

[7] This view is proposed in biographies by: Stephen Dobranski, Barbara K. Lewalski, David Masson, and other chronicles of Milton's life. In *The Cambridge Introduction to Milton,* Dobranski writes that Milton admired Shakespeare and went about "consciously allying himself with England's other great poet" (59).

predecessor.[8] My claim is that these two latter views are not mutually exclusive but, in fact, both correct: Milton enjoyed Shakespeare, went to him often as a source, and carefully covered up his tracks so he would not be considered a Shakespeare follower. Milton aspired to become a poet of a greater type, so therefore he needed to set himself apart. To borrow the theoretical language employed by Bloom, this project will attempt to read Milton's "clinamen," his "poetic misprision" or "misreading" of Shakespeare that characterizes his "swerve" away from his greatest and, in space in time, closest predecessor. For Bloom, every reading is a misreading, and "a poet swerves away from his precursor, by so reading his precursor's poem as to execute a clinamen in relation to it. This appears as a corrective movement in his own poem" (14). Milton's "corrective movements" in relation to Shakespeare's poetry constitute the notion of imitation as set forth by Ben Jonson: the ability to put another poet's "riches" to his "own use." Milton certainly converted to his own use the riches of Shakespeare, the very wealthiest of his English predecessors, and "swerved" away from him so sharply that scholars of Milton rarely look to their relationship for signs of influence. In the words of Bloom, "The clinamen between the strong poet and the Poetic Father is made by the whole being of the later poet, and the true history of modern poetry would be the accurate recording of these revisionary swerves" (44). This dissertation will offer four chapters that read and record Milton's "revisionary swerves" away from Shakespeare in works never before read together.

[8] Bloom agrees with Johnson and Hazlitt by insisting Milton was, like Shakespeare, "incapable of suffering the anxiety of influence" (34). For Bloom, "Shakespeare belongs to the giant age before the flood, before the anxiety of influence became central to consciousness" (11). If this be the case, then, Milton is Noah.

Shakespeare and Milton were very different writers: the former was predominantly known for his dramatic poetry, the latter for his narrative and lyric poems. However, Shakespeare also wrote a pair of very well known narrative poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, another called *A Lover's Complaint*, a lesser known allegorical poem called *The Phoenix and the Turtle*, and his most famous lyric poetry, a long, now famous sequence of 154 sonnets. And sometimes, rarely, Milton wrote dramatic poetry, most particularly *Comus*, the only play he ever composed and saw acted before him on stage, and *Samson Agonistes*, a "closet Tragedy," meant only to be read and, quite the contrary, *not* acted on stage. Thus, for the most part, Shakespeare wrote dramatic poetry, and Milton wrote lyric and narrative poetry.

Theoretically, the formal differences between dramatic, narrative, and lyric poetry entails that the latter two come by way of a speaker—the poetic voice of a "non-character" functioning both inside and outside the text: as a poet, part of the world, but as the teller, part of the story. In narrative poetry, he is the storyteller, and the reader is the implied audience. In lyric poetry, he is generally a lonely poet, or shepherd, singing his poetic song to the natural audience of the trees and the hills, pouring out highly personal thoughts and emotions. Since the poet's outpouring is so often done as though he is unaware of the reader, the surrounding natural environment his audience, lyric poetry can have a dramatic effect. But what lyric and narrative poetry have in common, as opposed to dramatic poetry, is that they both involve a speaker to articulate the verses; dramatic poetry has no speaker, but divides up the lines among many different speakers, thus decentering the actual source of the poetry.

While narrative poetry, like *Paradise Lost*, tells a story, and lyric poetry, like the sonnets, expresses the speaker's emotions or psychological state, the purpose of dramatic poetry, as expressed by Hamlet, is "to hold as 'twere the mirror up to Nature to show Virtue her feature, Scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure" (3.2.21-24). In other words, the prince tells the player, the "purpose of playing" is to imitate the world and, thereby, to give the people in the audience a good look at themselves. In this sense, we can grant dramatic poetry ample moral or didactic value, however little it teaches us about the author. Though we may be tempted, we cannot, for example, look to Hamlet—even as a playwright staging *The Murder of Gonzago*—and expect to discern with any degree of certainty the views of Shakespeare; however I would venture a guess that from time to time most of us break this rule. When Hamlet instructs the player, "Let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them" (3.2.36-37), few if any among us remain so scrupulous as to resist reading in these lines the frustrations of a playwright who often saw his marvelous work marred by boisterous performers like Will Kemp.[9] Many scholars throughout the years have claimed to hear Shakespeare speak somewhat directly through Prospero, and have even argued it persuasively, yet it would be inaccurate to assign a one-to-one equivalence to the main character of his final play and the playwright himself. Due to the very nature of dramatic verses, in the absence of supplementary writings such as personal letters, diaries and notebooks, or complete systems of theology in lucid Latin prose, such

[9] Will Kemp played many of Shakespeare's clown roles until leaving the company in 1599, at which time he was replaced by Robert Armin whom scholars generally believe to have been a more intelligent, intellectual clown than the characteristically scurrilous Kemp.

identifications are forever troubled at best.[10] In short, the problem of authorial intention we face concerning Shakespeare is far different from the one we face as readers of Milton; with an abundance of prose writings, letters, and personal accounts of the latter, we can often discern to a reasonable degree just what he meant by this or that metaphor in this or that poem. But with Shakespeare, owing not only to the relative lack of such peripheral literary material to inform his great works, but to the formal vicissitudes of dramatic poetry, we cannot, even by reading all of his works carefully, and all the extant literature about them, say with any degree of certainty what were the beliefs of the man himself.

When he was called to write his own drama, the young Milton borrowed from Shakespeare liberally, specifically in two ways: when singing in the pastoral key, painting luscious and sweet-sounding descriptions of nature, and in his depictions of fairies and spirits. The enchanting songs, or "airs," of Shakespeare's ghost haunt Milton's early poetry, most particularly in *L'Allegro* and *Comus*, however a few such echoes resound in almost all of Milton's early poetic works. But as Milton employed distinctively Shakespearean language he performed a "swerve" away from the bard in each case of borrowing. In Milton, the entire pagan literary tradition associating gods

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[10] Here I am referring, of course, to the systematic Latin prose theology that Milton called his "dearest and best possession," *De doctrina christiana* ("Of Christian Doctrine"). Since its discovery in 1823, scholars have noted that it offers a comprehensive gloss on Milton's epic poetry, and valuable, systematic insight in to Milton's thinking based on his lifelong study of scripture. For a comprehensive study of the connections between *de Doctrina* and *Paradise Lost*, see Maurice Kelley's monograph entitled *This Great Argument*: *A Study of Milton's* De doctrina christiana *as a Gloss Upon* Paradise Lost. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1941. After recent debate concerning whether *De Doctrina* can be properly attributed to Milton, scholars have come to a consensus—the work is indeed Milton's—yet there is still contention concerning how accurately it can be considered a "gloss" for Milton's poetry. For the fullest account of the production of the manuscript, see Gordon Campbell, Thomas N. Corns, John K. Hale. *John Milton: Life, Work, and Thought.* Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008.

with Nature—a tradition within which he locates Shakespeare, whom he calls "Son of Memory," and "heir of fame"—gets subordinated to what he considers the superior, Christian poetic tradition—a tradition within which he locates himself and, moreover, aspires to be the greatest. And in Shakespeare, from whom Milton borrowed the songs, language, and overall literary power of spiritual beings, such phenomena are never simply, *really* spirits, but always at best *maybe* real. Usually it is at least implied that whatever seemingly paranormal occurrence someone has experienced is, in fact, at least partly the result a psychiatric phenomenon, like madness, or an illusion, therefore symbolic of the artist and the creative process. Such is the case with Prospero, for example, whose "rough" magic lends itself easily to a reading of the artist and his creative powers. In other words, in Shakespeare there is a general sense of skepticism concerning ghosts; in Milton there is no such skepticism.

While Shakespeare was by no means the first or only dramatist to depict spiritual presences in the theatre, as Stephen Greenblatt notes, among the likes of Christopher Marlowe and Ben Jonson, and the "leading Renaissance English playwrights, it is only Shakespeare who fully participates in the popular vogue for presenting ghosts onstage" (156). However for Shakespeare, contends Greenblatt, ghosts are less a metaphysical phenomenon and more the effect of "anxious misreading" (161), usually the product of someone's psychiatric distress, delirium, or if not, metaphorical representations of the artist's relationship to the creative process. Shakespeare does indeed seem fascinated by the idea of ghosts, but he has never actually depicted any that were, within the context of the play, "real" for certain. In *The Comedy of Errors* and *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare

stages suspicions of ghosts, however there are none in either work, only "unnerving resemblances that turn out to have an entirely naturalistic explanation" (161). Though we cannot determine with any degree of certainty what Shakespeare thought about the existence of ghosts, it is quite likely a reader like Milton would have seen in Shakespeare's treatment of such rarefied beings the same skepticism regarding the matter that compelled Jonson and Marlowe to avoid depicting them altogether. There seems to be an exception to this, and it is Christopher Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*; however, even the magic of Faustus is not "real" in a strict sense, but rather, illusions created by actors, and the images are without substantial bodies. In the words of Faustus they "are but shadows, not substantial" (4.1.103).[11] Likewise, when they appear on Shakespeare's stage—something that happens far more often—spirits are never metaphysically real for certain, and this may very well account for Milton's attraction to and swerve away from Shakespeare's depictions of the supernatural. For in Milton's poetics, spiritual beings become real and work real effects on the world, thus accommodating his Christian worldview, including his claim in *Paradise Lost* that his verses are delivered to him by a heavenly muse. Milton not only takes away the built-in interrogation of the "reality claim" of ghosts and spirits, he seems to remove the very need for such a claim, and in *Comus*, through The Attendant Spirit and Sabrina, employs his own "spirits of another type" to show airy beings bearing directly upon real events in the world. The Attendant Spirit's guidance, or Sabrina's freeing the Lady from the chair, represent moments of

[11] Citations of Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* come from the "B-Text" in *Dr. Faustus and Other Plays,* Oxford World's Classics. Eds. David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995.

what seems to be the overall point of *Comus*, that there is a power in Virtue that, should one wield it, in moments of weakness "Heaven itself" will "stoop" to bring aid.

These poets were both familiar with literary and dramatic depictions passed down through the traditional, Judeo-Christian notion of spiritual realms—including such loci as heaven and hell, or purgatory—and the prevalent notion that such spirits can only haunt our world during the night. As Marcellus, who first espied the ghost, testifies, "It faded on the crowing of the cock" (1.1.156)[12]; by the ghost's own account, he is

> Doomed for a certain term to walk the night
> And for the day confined to fast in fires
> Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
> Are burned and purged away. (1.5.10-13)

But in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*, Shakespeare depicts, in the words of Oberon to Puck, "spirits of another sort" (*MND* 3.2.400),[13] quite unlike the purgatory bound ghost of the dead king in *Hamlet*. These spirits of Shakespeare's, such as Oberon and Titania, Ariel or Puck, provided Milton with an avenue for creating his own alternative spirits, something more like the Christian notion of angels.

Since the first few years of the current century, Shakespeare scholars have shown an increased interest, commonly referred to as the "turn to religion" in literary studies, in reading with a heightened sensitivity to the ways religious thinking and practices factor into early modern literature. In the Introduction to their collection of essays entitled

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[12] Citations of *Hamlet* refer to the Arden Shakespeare, Third Series. Eds. Ann Thomson and Neil Taylor. London: Thomson Learning, 2006.

[13] Citations of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* refer to the Arden Shakespeare, Second Series. Ed. Harold F. Brooks. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1976. Citations of *The Tempest* will refer to the Arden Shakespeare, Third Series. Eds. Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan. London: 1999.

Shakespeare and Religion, Kenneth S. Jackson and Arthur R. Marotti write that in the works of Shakespeare,

> the lines between secular and sacred, transcendent and immanent blur so continuously that we begin to doubt our own vocabulary and historical paradigms in our attempts to describe the strange otherness of Shakespeare's religion, the way in which he can, again, deliberately and Systematically strip away the layers of religion until nothing is left. (9)

Stressing that Shakespeare seriously complicated the distinction between the secular and the sacred, Jackson and Marotti argue compellingly that the bard lived and wrote during a time when he could not help but be profoundly affected by religion; though he does not seem to have been a religious man, he could not have been thinking entirely apart from religion. He had to think "through," not around it. However, in emphasizing the importance of an understanding of the religion-saturated cultural context in which Shakespeare worked, the editors bring together a collection of essays that "all portray the dramatist as a religious skeptic who was critical of his own religiously conflicted society" (5). This is, in fact, the direction in which most scholars take that unapproachable question of the playwright's personal religious status. Taking a philosophical angle, in his study of *Shakespeare's Metaphysics* Michael Witmore emphasizes Shakespeare's apparent mortalism, and casts the playwright in the image of Spinoza, arguing that Shakespeare's body of plays as a whole speaks to the great playwright's sense of oneness with the universe around him, calling the playwright a "dramaturgical monist" (25). This is, however, about the closest thing to any religious tendency in Shakespeare that any recent scholarship finds. Suggesting that Shakespeare's beliefs, "when they can be inferred, show a mind and a spirit uncontained by orthodoxy," Eric Mallin has written

that "while the symbolic, thematic elements of Christianity certainly find their way into his work, Shakespeare activates these features in decidedly irreligious or ironic ways" (3). George Santayana has gone further in arguing that in the choice "between Christianity and nothing," Shakespeare "chose nothing" (152). All the authors anthologized in Jackson and Moretti's edition are careful never to address outright the question of Shakespeare's personal religious inclinations beyond the mere "religious impulses" they identify, and all the essays in the analogy set forth the consensus view of Shakespeare, remaining clearly unconvinced of any orthodox religious proclivities in the bard. Any time matters of religion are brought up in Shakespeare—something that happens a lot—the bard is in part challenging, criticizing, and often mocking orthodox religion. One can only wonder how noticeable this would have been to a hyper-attentive, religious-minded reader like John Milton. I will argue that it was very noticeable and that it motivated Milton to borrow from him with a simultaneous attraction and repulsion.[14]

In Milton's early works, the poetic voice of Shakespeare echoes mainly throughout *L'Allegro* and, to an even greater degree, *Comus.* John Carey's edition of Milton's shorter poems avers that "Shakespeare is Milton's stylistic master in *Comus*," as "several speeches read like Shakespeare-pastiche," and there are in all "thirty-two indisputable echoes, coming from fourteen of the plays and from *Lucrece*" (171). Discussing *L'Allegro*, Carey points out that the "principal model" in this poem is also Shakespeare, finding "fourteen echoes, four from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, eight of

[14] Most notable among other scholars who have written on Shakespeare and the "religious turn" are Kristen Poole, Deborah Shuger, Richard Wilson, David Bevington, David Scott Kastan, David Loewenstein, Alison Shell, Peter Iver Kaufman, and Cyndia Susan Clegg.

the others from the early plays" (131). It makes sense that Milton would borrow from the great playwright liberally in *L'Allegro*, and hardly at all in *Il Pensoroso*, as the former of the two companion pieces is the one that mentions Shakespeare by name and, indeed, the one best expressing the fanciful, mirthful spirit that Milton attributed to his predecessor. While it seems hard to believe Milton would have assigned such unified, gestalt identification to writers whom we understand to have been more complex, that is, in fact, just what Milton does. As John Guillory observes, "More than many poets, Milton tends to assign a unified significance to poetic careers; his prose comments, particularly in the very artful autobiographical digressions, confirm his habitual reading of the poetic character as a kind of poem" (71). The most famous and most significant of these comments is, of course, the passage from *An Apology for Smectymnuus* (1641) where Milton states that

> he who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things, ought himself to be a true poem; that is, a composition and pattern of the best and honourablest things; not presuming to sing high praises of heroic men, or famous cities, unless he have in himself the experience and the practice of all that which is praiseworthy.
> (*CPW* 1:890)[15]

In this passage, he is asking us to associate the product with the producer, the poetry with the poet. For Milton, the character of the poet has everything to do with whether or not the poetry itself has value. Therefore, unconvinced of the morality of Shakespeare's character (to put it nicely), Milton was likewise unconvinced of the value of Shakespeare's literature; as the Lady confidently avers in her rejection of Comus, "None

[15] Prose quotations of Milton will refer to the standard, Yale edition, *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*. Ed. Don M. Wolfe. 7 Vols. New Haven: Yale UP, 1952-83.

but such as are good men can give good things" (703). This rejection of the tempter's argument parallels Milton's rejection of Shakespeare, which he likely thought necessary to express because he did, in fact, draw from his predecessor explicitly when he thought appropriate.

Regarding *Comus*, Milton's motivations for borrowing from Shakespeare are perhaps even more self-evident: endeavoring to write a drama, and with intention of seeing it acted on the stage, the young poet went to the most popular of Elizabethan dramatists to gather materials. Who better to plunder than Shakespeare, the late great playwright whose comedies and tragedies and histories and strange combinations thereof had earned him enough economic success not only to purchase the status of gentility for his family through the acquisition of a coat of arms, but to retire to the largest, most opulent house in his hometown of Stratford-upon-Avon?[16] It may be an overstatement to say that in the England of Milton's youth Shakespeare was renowned as the greatest of English poets, but he was surely renowned as a playwright whose highly entertaining works had been a hit at the box office, and eventually he was able to afford a step up the social ladder when he purchased a family coat of arms. Moreover the very existence of the first folio, a very fine and expensive volume, posthumously published, and then the

[16] Taking readers on an imaginary walking tour of Elizabethan England, Ian Mortimer points out that "On your right, directly across the lane from the chapel, is the most prestigious house in town: New Place, built by Sir Hugh Clopton—the man who constructed the (London) Bridge. It is three stories high and timber-framed, with brick between the timbers, not willow and plasterwork. Five bays wide, it has one large window on either side of the central porch, five windows on the floor above, and five on the floor above that. Each of the top-floor windows is set in a gable looking out across the town. The whole proud edifice is a fitting tribute to a successful businessman. In 1558, Sir Hugh Clopton is the second most famous man of Stratford (after the archbishop), and a figure greatly admired by the townsfolk. The boys leaving the grammar school and walking back into the center of the town regard this building as a statement of success. A future pupil, William Shakespeare, will eventually follow in Sir Hugh's footsteps, make his fortune in London, and return to live out his days in this very house" (3).

publication of a second edition in 1632, speaks to the rising stock of Shakespeare's name, even in Milton's England. And as many but certainly not all of us will agree, there is something undeniably special about Shakespeare; his prodigious talent was characterized by a certain, practically unspeakable sublimity (for lack of a better word), and just as one would expect him to, Milton recognized it. In other words, Shakespeare's musical lyricism sounded so good, so enchanting, Milton couldn't help but borrow from it, particularly when he needed to incorporate more mirthful, Shakespearean themes, like amorous love, dancing and revelry, and the presence of the paranormal.

In *L'Allegro*, Milton goes to Shakespeare for lyrical inspiration when he takes a rare opportunity to address sexier topics. Invoking one of the three sister graces, Euphrosyne, coextensive with "mirth," Milton imagines the goddess being conceived by Bacchus and Venus on a bed of "fresh-blown roses washed in dew" (22). This phrase mimics the wording of Petruchio, who in *The Taming of the Shrew* reveals his plans to woo Kate when he soliloquizes that should she frown, he will "say she looks as clear / As morning roses newly washed with dew" (*SHR* 2.1.174).[17] Little wonder if the exciting and dramatic staging of sexual tension between Petruchio and Kate impressed itself upon the mind of the young, chaste Milton, who concerned himself with making arguments for the spiritual importance of chastity. Still imagining the goddess Mirth's

[17] According to a lexical check performed through *Early English Books Online*, the only other uses of this phrase that predated Milton's can be found in Robert Albott's *England's Parnassus*: *The Choysest Flowers of Our Modern English Poets* (1600), which came out seven years after *SHR*, and references Shakespeare many times, and in Thomas Cooper's Latin thesaurus, (1578). Eight of the nine hits for "washed with dew" or "washt in dew" point to Shakespeare; as for "washed in dew," or "washt in dew," there are no hits apart from Milton's save for one that comes well after *L'Allegro*, by Sir William D'Avenant, (1659). Citations of *The Taming of the Shrew* will refer to the Arden Shakespeare, Third Series. Ed. Barbara Hodgdon. London: Methuen, 2010.

conception, two lines later Milton echoes Shakespeare again when he imagines the flower bed on which Euphrosye's father Bacchus "filled" Venus with "thee a daughter fair, / So buxom, blithe, and debonair." In the opening lines of *Pericles*, Gower (the play's equivalent to a chorus) describes the spectacularly beautiful Hesperides as "buxom, blithe and full of face" (23).[18] Milton transplanted the line exactly, save for the change at the end where he excised "full of face," and added "debonair," which means "noble," literally "of good air," or of "goodly disposition," thereby adding a layer of complexity: the beauty of Mirth's face is not superficial, but the result of a goodly disposition.

Other iterations of distinctly Shakespearean language in *L'Allegro* come from a variety of Shakespearean plays, most especially *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Tempest*, and *Hamlet.*[19] To the first of these, many scholars have attributed the notion of a form-changing substance in *Comus*—the love juice roughly equivalent to the bubbling cup that, upon consumption, triggers a metamorphosis in the drinker resulting in the drinker falling in love indiscriminately with the first person they see, or taking on a new, beastly visage, yet thinking it is good looking, as does Nick Bottom after Puck has turned his head into the head of an ass. As Stephen Dobranski has noted, "the idea of not perceiving one's 'foul disfigurement' and thinking oneself 'more comely' recalls Bottom's ignorance about his heady change and Titania's magically induced infatuation

[18] Citations of *Pericles* will refer to The Arden Shakespeare, Third Series. Ed. Suzanne Gossett. London: Bloomsbury, 2004.

[19] While they do not agree on Milton's treatment of these Shakespearean works, most scholars do agree on their predominance. I would add *Measure for Measure* and *Love's Labour's Lost*, which seemed also to stay in Milton's mind; such influence will make up the subject matter of chapter 2.

with what she mistakes for Bottom's beauty and wisdom" (58). Illustrating a scene of dancing and mirth, Milton echoes *The Tempest*, "Each one tripping on his toe" (4.1.46), when his sorcerer proclaims "Come, and trip it as you go / On the light fantastic toe" (33-34). Thus the spiritual worlds of Oberon and Puck, Prospero and Ariel seems to have intrigued the young Milton, who drew from there liberally when it suited his needs. Certainly it suited Milton's needs to borrow from Shakespeare in *L'Allegro*, a fun-spirited ode to "mirth" in octosyllabic couplets. The young poet borrows from Oberon's language as he limns a rustic vision of sunrise, just after dancing and reveling has lasted all night:

> Till the dappled dawn doth rise;
> Then to come in spite of sorrow,
> And at my window bid good morrow,
> Through the sweet-briar, or the vine,
> Or the twisted eglantine. (44-48)

In Shakespeare's early comedy that is at least partially about the distinction between the court and the "green world" or nature, Oberon tells Puck:

> I know a bank where the wild thyme blows,
> Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows,
> Quite over-canopied with luscious woodbine,
> With sweet musk-roses, and with eglantine. (*MND* 2.1.49-52)

Apart from the similar sounds of the verses, Milton's end rhymes "vine" and "eglantine," sounds like Shakespeare's end rhymes "woodbine" and "eglantine." Moreover this phrase sounds reminiscent of a description in *Much Ado About Nothing*, when Don Pedro uses

the verb "dapple" to describe a sunrise, observing how "the gentle day . . . Dapples the drowsy east with spots of grey" (3.25, 27).[20]

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Oberon gives a description of dawn when he explains that while most spirits consort only with night and, upon the first rays of daybreak must flee—such as the ghost of Hamlet's dead father—he and Puck are an different type of spiritual beings, quite used to the daylight, and may haunt the earth

> Even till the eastern gate all fiery red,
> Opening to Neptune with fair blessed beams,
> Turns into yellow gold his salt green streams. (3.2.403-05)

In *L'Allegro*, Milton echoes this passage, describes going for an early morning walk:

> Right against the eastern gate,
> Where the great sun begins his state,
> Robed in flames and amber light. (59-61)

In addition to borrowing the phrase "eastern gate," Milton's lines also incorporate the notion of fire—changing "all fiery red" to "robed in flames"—as well as mimic the colors described by Shakespeare, changing the "yellow gold" of Oberon's passage to "amber light," simply another way of describing the same color. Someone might object that there is nothing so unique in describing the sun in terms of fire, or describing it as yellow, or that describing the sun rising through the "eastern gate" was a poetic commonplace, and they would not be wrong. In Early Modern England, however, people did not know the sun is a flaming ball of gas, and more importantly, Milton will mention Shakespeare by

[20] Citations of *Much Ado About Nothing* will refer to the Arden Shakespeare, Third Series. Ed. Claire McEachern. London: Bloomsbury, 2005.

name later in this poem. Moreover, Milton's reference to the "nibbling flocks" (72) echoes the language of "nibbling sheep" (4.1.62) in *The Tempest*; and his reference to knights and barons in "weeds of peace" (120) sounds like a description of "great Hector in his weeds of peace" (3.3.239) from *Troilus and Cressida.*[21]

Perhaps the most easily recognizable moment of Shakespearean influence in *L'Allegro* comes in a section where he imagines people conversing over drinks:

> Then to the spicey nut-brown ale,
> With stories told of many a feat,
> How fairy Mab the junkets ate;
> She was pinched, and pulled she said,
> And he by friar's lantern led,
> Tells how the drudging goblin sweat,
> To earn his cream-bowl duly set. (100-06)

The fanciful tales Milton imagines people telling over a spicy nut-brown ale concern Mab, queen of the fairies, famously described by Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*:[22]

> O, then, I see Queen Mab hath been with you
> She is the fairies' midwife and she comes
> In shape no bigger than an agate stone
> On the fore-finger of an alderman. (1.4.54-57)

Moreover, in referring to the "drudging goblin" Milton seems to be thinking of Puck, or Robin Goodfellow, the Hobogoblin of *Dream*, who, like Ariel, must perform earthly toil for earthly masters, Prospero and Oberon.

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[21] Citations of *Troilus and Cressida* will refer to the Arden Shakespeare, Second Series. Ed. Kenneth Palmer. London: Methuen, 1994.

[22] Citations of *Romeo and Juliet* will refer to the Arden Shakespeare, Second Series. Ed. Brian Gibbon. Italy: Methuen, 1980.

These lines lead up to the section of the poem where Milton discusses the "well-trod stage" and, of course, mentions Shakespeare by name:

> Then to the well-trod stage anon,
> If Johnson's learned sock be on,
> Or sweetest Shakespeare, Fancy's child,
> Warble his native wood-notes wild. (131-134)

Here Milton imitates the very lyricism that is the reason he finds Shakespeare so attractive: the natural talent for stringing words together and making them sound beautifully musical to the ears. Of course, the alliteration in "warble his native wood-notes wild" is an effort to mimic this quality, while also drawing a distinction between Johnson's learned talent, got by attending university, and Shakespeare's inborn, "native" gift. It seems Milton associated the verb "warble" with Shakespeare, which the latter used several times, most notably for our purposes in *Love's Labour's Lost* when the "fantastic" Don Adriano de Armado comically instructs his page Moth to "warble" and "make passionate my sense of hearing" (3.1.1).[23] Even more than "warble," though, perhaps the most obvious Shakespearean echo in this line comes in the description of Shakespeare as "fancy's child," echoing a line from *Love's Labour's Lost* in which the King of Navarre refers to Armado as a "child of fancy." Chapter two treats in greater detail what it could have meant for Milton to call his predecessor a "child of fancy," or why he might associate him with a character like Don Adriano de Armado; but now, let us move to a consideration of the elements of Shakespearean lyricism in *Comus*.

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[23] Citations of *Love's Labours Lost* will refer to the Arden Shakespeare, Third Series. Ed. H.R. Woudhuysen. London: Cengage Learning, 1998.

Milton's only major dramatic poem, *Comus* manifests the influence of Shakespeare more than all Milton's other poems combined.[24] When the sorcerer takes the stage, star of the show, his opening couplet "The star that bids the shepherd fold, / Now the top of heav'n doth hold" (93-94), sounds reminiscent of Duke Vincentio's phrasing at sunrise in *Measure for Measure*: "Look, the unfolding star calls up the / shepherd" (4.2.200-01).[25] Notes of *Love's Labour's Lost* also resound in *Comus,* particularly in the younger brother's observation that "divine philosophy" is "musical as is Apollo's lute" (478), echoing Berowne's estimation that love is "as sweet and musical / as bright Apollo's lute" (4.3.339-40). In the opening lines of *Comus*, Milton's Attendant Spirit sounds like Shakespeare when he refers to the "sweet poison of misused wine" (47), echoing *King John*, "sweet, sweet, sweet poison for the age's tooth" (1.1.213).[26] Comus' referring to the "tell-tale sun" (141), echoes the narrator of *The Rape of Lucrece* speaking of the "tell-tale Day" (806).[27] The Lady's description of dusk as a time when "grey-hooden Even" comes "Like a sad votarist in palmer's weed" (188), echoes "votarist" in *Measure for Measure*, and according to the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* Shakespeare's is the first use of this word. Perhaps most compelling of these, Milton takes a cue from *As You Like It* when he writes the Younger Brother's description of the dangers of a beautiful woman walking alone through the woods. For Rosalind, "Beauty

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[24] Technically, *Samson Agonistes* is also a dramatic poem, but Milton specified that piece as a "closet" Tragedy, meant specifically to be read rather than performed.

[25] Chapter 2 treats in greater detail Milton's interest in *Measure for Measure* and *Love's Labour's Lost.*

[26] Citations of *King John* refer to the Arden Shakespeare, Second Series. Ed. E.A.J. Honingmann. London: Methuen, 1954.

[27] References to *The Rape of Lucrece* refer to the Arden Shakespeare. Ed. F.T. Prince. Arden, 1960.

provoketh thieves sooner than gold" (1.3.107). For the Younger Brother, expanding on the notion,

> Beauty like the fair Hespearian tree
> Laden with blooming gold, had need the guard
> Of dragon-watch with unenchanted eye,
> To save her blossoms, and defend her fruit
> From the rash hand of bold Incontinence. (392-96)

Worrying, like Rosalind, that a woman cannot walk through the woods without seriously risking sexual assault, and therefore that the wayward Lady is in danger, the Younger Brother elaborates the conceit expressed in Shakespeare beautifully. The Elder Brother, then, responds by suggesting that they keep at least an "equal poise" of "hope and fear," inclining more to former than the latter, echoing a phrase from *Measure for Measure*, an "equal poise of sin and charity" (2.4.69).[28] Assuring his younger brother of their sister's "hidden strength," the elder brother claims that she who has "chastity" is "clad in complete steel" (420), echoing *Hamlet*, when the prince describes his father as dressed in "complete steel" (1.4.52).

As Verity, Guillory, Carey, and others have suggested, Milton was careful to draw from Shakespeare in such a way that he could best escape detection. Most telling of this tendency, perhaps, is a line spoken by the enchanter, Comus, that Milton revised between the Trinity and Bridgewater manuscripts, changing "yellow sands" to "tawny sands,"

> And on the tawny sands and shelves,
> Trip the pert fairies and the dapper elves,

[28] Citations of *Measure for Measure* refer to *The Norton Shakespeare: Based on the Oxford Edition.* 2nd Ed. Eds. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, and Katharine Eisaman Maus. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2009.

> By dimpled brook and fountains brim,
> The wood-nymphs decked with daisies trim
> Their merry wakes and pastimes keep
> What hath night to do with sleep? (117-22)

In Verity's opinion, Milton made this revision "to avoid too obvious comparison with Ariel's song" in *The Tempest*, which begins "come unto these yellow sands, / And then take hands" (1.2.375-76). Tawny, of course, means yellow—or in the case of Shakespeare's Cleopatra, who had a "tawny front," a sort of yellowish-brown—and Milton's revision is likely to reflect an effort to separate his verses from their source as much as possible. In addition to the echo in the sands, the call to "take hands" also sounds like a precursor to the language of Comus, who will end his speech by inviting his followers to dance: "Come, knit hands and beat the ground / In a light fantastic round" (143-44). If Verity, Carey, and others are correct, Milton was not only borrowing from Shakespeare, but he was consciously aware that he was doing so and feeling some anxiety about it.

Moreover in this same speech, Comus refers to the morning coming on "th' Indian steep" (139), meaning mountains to the east, and reminds us again of *Dream,* when Titania queries Oberon "Why art thou here? / Come from the farthest steep of India" (2.1.68-69). We might sense another effort, however weak, to avoid comparison in his changing "steep of India" to "Indian steep." Further, in claiming "Virtue could see to do what Virtue would / by her own radiant light, though sun and moon / Were in the flat sea sunk" (373-75), the Elder brother expresses a notion not unlike Juliet's begging night to hurry and come "since lovers can see to do their amorous rites / By their own beauties"

(*RJ* 3.2.8-9). Here we see Milton take an erotic idea from Shakespeare, that lovers can "see" enough by the light of love to perform their amorous rites in the dark, and map it on to his notion of Virtue—specifically Chastity—which could see by its own light even if it were sunk deep in the sea. Other Shakespearean miscellanies occur throughout the masque, such as one during the seduction scene, when Comus urges the Lady that her beauty is meant to be enjoyed: "It is for homely features to keep home" (748), he sounds like Valentine at the outset of *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, urging Proteus to stop urging him to stay because "Home-keeping youth have ever homely wits" (1.1.2).[29] A person with "homely features" would be, to put it bluntly, ugly, and one with "homely wits" would be ignorant of the things to be learned by getting out of the home and into the world.

Milton did not borrow exclusively from Shakespeare's comedies and ignore the tragedies. Echoes of *King Lear*, for example, are perhaps present in that Lady's response to Comus' entreaty to enjoy Nature's bounty, an encomium to Temperance:

> If every just man that now pines with want
> Had but a moderate and beseeming share
> Of that which lewdly-pampered Luxury
> Now heaps upon some few with vast excess,
> Nature's full blessings would be well dispensed
> In unsuperfluous even proportion. (768-73)

This same conceit, somewhat of a precursor to the nineteenth-century thinking of Karl Marx—Renaissance socialism, if you will—finds expression in *King Lear* when

[29] Citations of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* refer to the Arden Shakespeare, Third Series. Ed. William C. Carroll. London: Bloomsbury, 2004.

Gloucester gives his purse to his son Edgar (in guise of Poor Tom), telling him that "distribution should undo excess, / And each man have enough" (4.1.80-81).[30] Lear voices similar sentiments as well, in an apostrophe to

> Poor naked wretches whereso'er you are,
> That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm
> How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides
> Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you
> From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en
> Too little care of this. Take physic, pomp. (3.4.28-33)

Sympathizing with the poor, who have no houses to protect them from storms literal and metaphorical—the idea being that life itself is a storm—King Lear's confession would likely have appealed to Milton. Later in his life, in *The Readie and Easie Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth* (1660), Milton would warn his fellow English people of the economic dangers of monarchy, the unreasonably high cost of having a king. While young Milton seems to have found Shakespearean comedy more useful for his own purposes, this example from *Lear* is not the only time we see him borrow from Shakespearean tragedy. The influence of *Hamlet* surfaces when, just after the tempter escapes with his wand intact, the Attendant Spirit tells that Sabrina underwent her change into "goddess of the river" when Nereus' daughters "through the porch and inlet of each sense / Dropped in ambrosial oils till she revived" (839-40). Not only does this recall the way in which Claudius murdered old King Hamlet, dropping liquid poison into his ear while he lay in his orchard sleeping, but in the reference to her ears and eyes as the "porch" of her senses, echoes the very language employed by the King's ghost when he

[30] Citations of *King Lear* refer to the Arden Shakespeare, Third Series. Ed. R.A. Foakes. New York: Thomson Learning, 1997.

tells to Prince Hamlet how his brother "In the porches of my ears did pour / The leprous distilment" (1.5.63-64). Moreover, as I will argue in the final chapter, Milton likewise draws from *Hamlet* when he writes "On Shakespeare," deploying the term "unvalu'd" to describe the First Folio with ambiguity, signaling both meanings: priceless, as most readers have thought, and lacking value, as Laertes means when he tells Ophelia that because Hamlet is royalty he "may not, as unvalued persons do, carve for himself" (1.3.18-19).

Perhaps the most prevalent influence exercised on Milton by Shakespeare concerns the songs or "airs" of rarefied characters like Ariel. When she rises, Milton's water nymph, Sabrina, sings a song that seems quite influenced by the one Ariel sings at the end of *The Tempest*:

> Whist from off the waters fleet
> Thus I set my printless feet
> O'er the cowslip's velvet head,
> That bends not as I tread. (896-99)

The imagery of her airy, "printless feet" atop the flowers that do not even bend from her weight recalls Prospero's famous "ye elves" speech, when the wizardly protagonist refers to aerial spirits as "ye that on the sands with printless foot / Do chase the ebbing Neptune" (5.1.35-36).[31] The Attendant Spirit further echoes Ariel, whose "where the bee sucks there suck I" (5.1.88), and "I drink the air before me, and return" (5.1.102) seem to have occupied Milton's mind when he rendered for his own spirit the following lines:

> To the ocean now I fly,

[31] Cf. *Venus and Adonis*: "the grass stoops not, she treads on it so light" (1028).

> And those happy climes that lie
> Where day never shuts his eye,
> Up in the broad fields of the sky:
> There I suck the liquid air. (976-80)

Like Ariel in *The Tempest*, Milton's Attendant Spirit conflates the elements of water and air, referring to the latter as a liquid he can "drink" or "suck." Also like Ariel, Milton's Attendant Spirit earns his freedom by the end of the play, having completed the task he was called to do, and sings of it:

> But now my task is smoothly done,
> I can fly, or I can run
> Quickly to the green earth's end,
> Where the bowed welkin slow doth bend,
> And from thence can soar as soon
> To the corners of the moon. (1012-1017)

In addition to sounding like the lines and prerogatives of Ariel and Puck, the closing lines of the Attendant Spirit further borrow from Shakespeare by echoing a phrase spoken by Hecate to the three witches in *Macbeth*, that a magical liquid exists "Upon the corner of the moon" (3.5.23), when he can fly or run to the "green earth's end," or "from thence can soar as soon / To the corners of the moon" (1014-16). Given the prevalence of Shakespearean influence on the poetry of young Milton, and particularly in *L'Allegro* and *Comus*, it is remarkable how little has been written on the literary relationship between the two, near-contemporary giants.

Probably the most incisive study of Milton's reaction to Shakespeare comes from John Guillory, whose investigation of Poetic Authority points to their disparate

acknowledgements concerning the sources of their verse: where does poetry come from? Shakespeare's plays tend to locate its origin in the human imagination, while Milton, "polemicize[d] against the imagination" (ix), as had Spenser, acknowledging rather a heavenly muse, one who leads men to truth by sending poetry that accords to Reason.[32] In Book V of *Paradise Lost*, Adam voices the notion that heaven-sent poetry is superior to poetry that originates in "lesser faculties" of the human imagination, ranking the faculty of "Reason" over that of "Fancy" when he teaches Eve to

> know that in the soul
> Are many lesser faculties that serve,
> Reason as chief; among these fancy next
> Her office holds: of all external things,
> Which the five watchful senses represent,
> She forms imaginations, airy shapes,
> Which reason, joining or disjoining, frames
> All what we affirm or what deny and call
> Our knowledge or opinion, then retires,
> Into her private cell when nature rests.
> Oft in her absence, mimic fancy wakes
> To imitate her, but, misjoining shapes,
> Wild work produces oft, and most in dreams,
> Ill matching words and deeds long past or late. (*PL* 5.100-13)

Adam's response to Eve's troublesome dream, this passage suggests that while Reason sleeps, Fancy haphazardly produces "wild work" as "most in dreams." In other words, fancy produces work that strays from reality. Here Milton's conception of poetry, as

[32] Doubtless, twenty-first century humanist scholars are prone to ignore Milton's claim to divine inspiration, that he wrote muse-delivered, "unpremeditated verse," but I submit that whether it was true, Milton believed it, took it quite seriously, and that in order to gain any kind of contextualized understanding of his poetry we must take it seriously too. For more on this important caveat that we must keep in mind when reading Milton, see William Kerrigan's *Prophetic Milton.* Charlottesville: Virginia UP, 1974. 11.

voiced by Adam, directly defies the theory suggested by Theseus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a play that blurs the distinction between fantasy and reality, sleep and wakefulness, associating poetry exclusively with the former.

Poetry, according to the lines of Theseus, can be understood by associating the "making" of poems with the simple "joining" of imaginary elements, such as Milton criticizes through Adam's speech to Eve.[33] Of course, in a play, what a character says may or may not represent what the author actually thinks; however, the mere presence of this view in Shakespeare, and moreover spoken by a figure of authority, makes pertinent the following lines. Declares the Duke,

> The lunatic, the lover, and the poet
> Are of imagination all compact.
> One sees more devils than vast hell can hold:
> That is the madman. The lover, all as frantic,
> Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt.
> The poet's eye in a fine frenzy rolling,
> Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
> And as imagination bodies forth
> The form of things unknown, the poet's pen
> Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
> A local habitation and a name. (*MND* 5.1.7-17)

Equating the poet with the "lunatic," Theseus articulates a model of the poet as a joiner of imaginary elements, and characterizes the process of creating poetry as a sort of frenzied state contrary to the faculty of reason, reminding us why Socrates wants to ban poets

[33] Poetry well-written was poetry "well-joined," perhaps most comically exemplified by the only successful performance by a rude mechanical, Snug the Joiner, whose lion roar wins the only round of applause the mechanicals actually get from their mostly dissatisfied audience. On making as "joining" in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, see: Patricia Parker, "Rude Mechanicals: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Shakespearean Joinery" in *Shakespeare from the Margins: Language, Culture, Context.* pp. 83-115.

from Plato's ideal republic. Such an explanation would have provoked Milton, who believed quite the contrary that his heavenly muse endeavored to lead men toward truth, working according to the dictates of Reason.[34] Since Adam's hierarchy of human faculties places "Reason" above all others, specifically "Fancy" or imagination, the "airy nothing" that is the source material for the type of poetry Theseus describes, Milton may be implicitly claiming that his poetry is greater than Shakespeare's. The Duke's poetry begins as something insubstantial, as nothing rather than something, until the poet gives "to airy nothing / A local habitation and a name" (5.1.16-17). But for Milton, 'nothing' cannot exist; the process of creation involves reshaping a prior something. Milton's God does not create the universe out of nothing, *ex nihilo*, but from the pre-existent matter of chaos. Thus, Milton and Shakespeare's metaphysical disagreement colors their starkly opposing conceptions of where poetry comes from.[35] As Guillory puts it, here Milton places Shakespeare "within orders of thinking and being . . . that stand in opposition to the more controlled exercise of Reason" (71) that produces Milton's heaven-inspired and in his own view, therefore superior poetry.

Thus in what he calls the "greatest usurpation in literary history," Guillory associates "Milton's rejection of imagination" with a deliberate "turn away from

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[34] Of course, Milton would have known better than to equate Theseus with Shakespeare; we cannot infer what Shakespeare believed by looking at his characters.

[35] Again, we cannot extract from Shakespeare's literary works the actual views of the dramatist himself. Nor can we even determine with any degree of certainty what Milton would have thought about Shakespeare's views. Milton, of course, would have been aware of the dramatic irony at work in any of Shakespeare's plays and poems, which undercut the characters therein—while they seem so deeply personal—seem to limn out a sort of "character," separate from Shakespeare himself, whom we have come to call the "speaker" of the poems. Even voices of authority like Theseus or Duke Vincentio cannot be thought to voice the opinions of Shakespeare himself, whose personal views we must be content to leave undetermined.

Shakespeare" (21). Building on this foundation, I will argue that while Milton does indeed "swerve" away from Shakespeare, the playwright influenced the poet far more significantly than scholars usually realize—certainly more than Milton was willing to admit—and that Milton knew this, did not want us to know it, and actively worked to cover it up; thus he exemplifies what G.W. Pigman III calls a "dissimulative" type of imitation, which refers to one poet drawing from another while "concealing or disguising the relation between text and model" (4). This dissertation will look where Milton hoped we wouldn't, reading the major works of his youth in light of Shakespeare's works to which they seem to speak, and thus revise our understanding of the young Milton's relationship to his most celebrated English predecessor, the vocational negotiation at the heart of his process of becoming Milton.

Noting the differing temporal orientations of these two artists to their works, Richard Helgerson observes that the "laureate" poet Milton aspired to become "could not be a timeserver. Rather he was the servant of eternity" (8). While Milton stressed that he intended his poetry to be unbounded by time, the poetry of Milton's Shakespeare was markedly finite.[36] In the First Folio of Shakespeare's works, hereafter referred to as F1, Ben Jonson's laudatory verses *To the Memory of My Beloved the Author, Mr. William Shakespeare* had famously proclaimed the bard to a poet "not of an age, but for all time"; perhaps this came as an annoyance to Milton, hearing Ben Jonson referred to as a poet unbound by time; it was after reading in F1 that Milton wrote his poem which seems to

[36] I am not saying Shakespeare was a "time-server." Rather, when I say "Milton's Shakespeare" was a "time-server," I mean Milton read him that way, and this is in part what I hope to herein prove.

answer Jonson, declaring Shakespeare's "honoured bones" to represent the "labor" not of eternity, but "of an age" (1-2).[37] In other words, Milton would not allow a characterization of Shakespeare as an eternal poet, for Milton's Shakespeare was a "timeserver," writing plays aimed at pleasing his contemporary audience night after night in the theater, sometimes about subject matter that was quite topical and current.[38] Take for example *Twelfth Night: Or, What You Will*, a play set and performed during the Christmas holiday at a time when secular Elizabethans were celebrating the Festival of the Epiphany.[39] Keir Elam notes that Duke Orsino may have been named after an Italian Duke named Orsini who, according to a letter sent to his wife, may have been present at the play's 1601 performance for Queen Elizabeth. (92) For Milton, this sort of focus on the current moment in history misses the point of "true poetry," which concerns itself with eternity;[40] in *Lycidas*, for example, he demonstrates the privileged status he affords eternal verses when he deals with the question of why one might devote one's life to writing poetry in the first place:

> Alas! What boots it with uncessant care
> To tend the homely slighted shepherd's trade,
> And strictly mediate the thankless muse? (64-66)

Answering that poets are motivated by fame, he carves out two different types of this distinction: on one hand a temporal, earthly fame among one's peers, and on the other

[37] This notion is argued in detail in Chap. 4.
[38] This notion is argued in detail in Chap. 1.
[39] Citations of *Twelfth Night: Or, What You Will* refer to the Arden Shakespeare, Third Series. Ed. Keir Elam. London: Bloomsbury, 2008.
[40] Someone might object here that *Comus* shares this same kind of topicality, as it spoke to the Bridgewater scandal; while this may be true to an extent, the current affairs in the Milton's play are only present in the background. In chapter two I will argue why the eternal elements constitute the foreground of the only stage play Milton would ever write and see performed.

hand an eternal, otherworldly fame in the eyes of heaven. And of course he privileges the latter:

> Fame is no plant that grows on mortal soil,
> Nor in the glistering foil
> Set off to th' world, nor in broad rumor lies,
> But lives and spreads aloft by those pure eyes,
> And perfect witness of all-judging Jove;
> As he pronounces lastly on each deed,
> Of so much fame in Heav'n expect thy meed. (78-84)

Thus the poem that announces Milton's arrival to serious poetry[41] lays out two types of poetic fame, one eternal and meaningful, the other temporal and vain; the eternal version may not even involve earthly fame, glory in the eyes of other men—what Milton called "vainglory"—but involved eternal, heavenly glory in the "pure eyes . . . of all-judging Jove" (81-82). According to Milton's understanding, this was not the type enjoyed by Shakespeare who, despite missing the entire point of writing poetry, was growing more and more famous in the eyes of men by writing works that were seemingly unconcerned with matters of eternity.[42]

Moreover, Milton framed himself as more fit for the office of "true poet" than Shakespeare due to the latter's lack of "seriousness," as Helgerson puts it, since his was "not the seriousness of a man writing in conformity to the dictates of truth and duty, but rather the seriousness of a child at play" (39). Whether we agree with Helgerson or not—

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[41] It is worth noting here that the Nativity Ode actually does the best job of announcing Milton's appearance on the scene of English poetry; it is the "birth poem" of Milton's youth, and he chose to place it first in his first book of poems in 1645. But when Milton composed and published *Lycidas*, the world had not yet seen his Nativity Ode, thus he jumped at the chance to announce his arrival to a public readership to whom, at the time, he was still yet to introduce himself.

[42] This notion will be discussed in greater detail in Chapters 1 and 3.

Shakespeare, after all, can be ponderously grave—in terms of an author's approach to his art, his was still not the seriousness of a self-proclaimed prophet who believed he was engaged in warfare with eternal spirits. This project will argue that Milton's version of Shakespeare, who in *L'Allegro* is called called "Fancy's Child," was a literary "fantastic," who built his reputation as a great and successful poet on work that conveyed outlandish, quite often sexual and irreligious content, designed with no greater purpose than to curry the audience's favor. In the Epilogue to *The Tempest*, Prospero—often read as an analogue for Shakespeare—finally announces that his "project" will either fail or succeed based on audience applause, as its purpose was simply "to please." In fact, this intention of Shakespeare's is indicated explicitly in his two most brilliantly successful comedies, *As You Like It*, and *Twelfth Night, Or What You Will.* Milton, on the other hand, pursued much graver or, in his view, higher purposes than to give his audience a thrill.

Thus the oppositional levity and gravity of Shakespeare and Milton, respectively, structures their literary relationship: we can imagine Shakespeare as lightness, Milton as weight. Seeking to get a grip on such "synesthetic equivalences," E. H. Gombrich suggests a "party game" which "consists of creating the simplest imaginable medium in which relationships can still be expressed, a language of two words only—let us call them 'ping' and 'pong.' If these were all we had . . . to name an elephant and a cat, which would be 'ping' and which 'pong?' I think the answer is clear" (370). Of course, Gombrich assumes we will all agree that the cat would be 'ping' and the elephant 'pong.' He continues: "Or hot soup and ice cream. To me, at least, ice cream is ping and soup

pong. Or Rembrandt and Watteau? Surely in that case Rembrandt would be pong and Watteau ping" (370). While Gombrich admits that it does not always work, he maintains that it does offer a compelling and surprisingly consistent way to think about relations between works of art. If we take for example *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *King Lear*, it seems clear that *Dream* would be "ping" and *Lear* "pong." However place *Lear* alongside *Paradise Lost* and it could go either way, depending on your own metaphysical inclinations. To a theist, the meaninglessness of the godless and nothing-filled universe of *Lear* could seem "ping" alongside the epic cosmos of *Paradise Lost*; or to an atheist, the starkly truthful world of *Lear* could be more "pong" alongside Milton's Christian mythology, as "ping" as any fable.[43] But if we could ask Milton the question of "ping" and "pong" with regard to his own work and Shakespeare's, there can be little doubt he would have called his own work "pong": a *vates* is "pong," an ordinary "maker" is "ping."

Following this line of thought, then, in Shakespeare's world of "ping" we note that characters often suggest life should not be taken too seriously—sometimes even that it is fundamentally meaningless and bereft of value. Witness Duke Vincentio's speech in *Measure for Measure*, advising a doomed Claudio to

> Be absolute for death: either death or life
> Shall thereby be the sweeter. Reason thus with life:
> If I do lose thee, I do lose a thing
> That none but fools would keep. A breath thou art,

[43] I am grateful to Eric Mallin for pointing me to this passage in Gombrich, and wish to credit him with a keen observation he made to me in conversation: alongside Shakespeare, Milton does seem to be "pong" and Shakespeare "ping." We might say, however, that Shakespeare is "so 'ping' he's 'pong,' while it would perhaps be a bit cruel to say that Milton was so 'pong' he was 'ping.'

> Servile to all the skyey influences
> That dost this habitation where thou keep'st
> Hourly afflict. Merely, thou art Death's fool,
> For him thou labor'st by thy flight to shun,
> And yet runn'st toward him still. (3.1.5-13)[44]

Pointing to the absurdity and ultimate meaninglessness of life, the Duke conveys a sense of existential emptiness that, while we cannot attribute it to Shakespeare himself, was at least on his mind as it surfaces repeatedly throughout his works.[45] It could be argued that the dramatic situation here demands we interpret the Duke's words as strategic more than earnest—he is, perhaps, only manipulating Claudio—and that a more germane iteration of this view might be better voiced by the latter when he begs Isabella to sacrifice her chastity and save his life. But Claudio's "Ay, but to die speech," in which he expresses the fear that death means he must "lie in cold obstruction" (3.1.130), or "bathe in fiery floods" (3.1.133), or perhaps, "be imprison'd in the viewless winds, / And blown with restless violence round about / The pendant world" (3.1.136-37), concludes with the statement that no matter how bad life can be, it is still preferable to death. For Claudio, even

> The weariest and most loathed worldly life
> That age, ache, penury and imprisonment
> Can lay on nature is a paradise

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[44] Again I wish to stress that we cannot assume characters like Duke Vincentio voice the opinions actually held by Shakespeare himself; we do not know for certain what Shakespeare believed about the universe. Yet it is enough that he made these suggestions through his characters to infer that these are thoughts such as he at least entertained.

[45] Again, of course we cannot learn Shakespeare's conception of the universe by listening to the words of Duke Vincentio, or any of his other characters; nor indeed can we learn what Milton would have thought they were. Still, the Duke shows us a picture of an empty, meaningless universe, one that Shakespeare depicted for audiences time and time again through various characters, and one which Milton must have at least conceived—since he read Shakespeare, Greek tragedy, basically everything—but one he never depicted at all.

To what we fear of death. (3.1.140-143)

This is the very opposite of what the Duke has told him; and whether the Duke has spoken in earnest or not, his speech has not convinced Claudio, whose fear of death clearly overrides the Greek logic on which the Duke tried to sell him. According to the vein of thought proffered by Vincentio, there is really no point of living, and given the choice between life and death, "none but fools" would continue since doing so means toiling pointlessly to escape death while we "runn'st toward him still" (3.1.13). Here we see at work a conception of human life that well accords with that of the ancient Greeks who, according to Friedrich Nietzsche, invented the dramatic form to deal with what they "felt" as "the terror and horror of existence" (181).

Discussing the Greek creation of Olympian figures, in *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche writes:

> There is an ancient story that King Midas hunted in the forest for a long time for the wise Silenus, the companion of Dionysus, without capturing him. When Silenus at last fell into his hands, the king asked what was best and most desirable of all things for man. Fixed and immovable, the demigod said not a word; till at last, urged by the king, he gave a shrill laugh and broke out into these words: 'Oh, wretched ephemeral race, children of chance and misery, why do ye compel me to tell you what it were most expedient for you not to hear? What is best of all is beyond your reach forever: not to be born, not to be, to be nothing. But the second best for you—is quickly to die.' (180)

This terrible wisdom of Silenus characterizes Nietzsche's view of the Greek conception of life, (which he adopted from Schopenhauer), namely that it is a ghastly horror with no meaning, only pointless striving and working to evade death, which eventually comes

regardless, that gave birth to the literary form of tragedy. For Nietzsche, art was a serious endeavor, and its function was to offer just a hint of a truth—that the nature of reality is, in fact, chaotic, dreadful, and ultimately meaningless—but simultaneously it had to shield us from that truth, because if undiluted such a realization would be crushing. Thus admiring the Greeks for their invention, he explains Greek Tragedy by employing the concepts of the gods Dionysus and Apollo, truth and illusion, respectively; the former represents the truth expressed above by Silenus, that life is a total horror, the latter, Apollo, provides the candy coating that makes such a pill palatable enough to swallow. Such a conception of art and its relation to life finds expression quite often in Shakespeare.

In *Measure for Measure*, for example, according to the Duke's Greek logic, life is entirely pointless and it would be better, in fact, not to endure the daily work of living when in the end it will all amount to nothing. Indeed, consider Macbeth's similar complaint that

> To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow
> Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
> From the last syllable of recorded time,
> And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
> The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
> And then is heard no more: it is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
> Signifying nothing. (*Macbeth* 5.5.18-19, 27)[46]

[46] Citations of *Macbeth* refer to *The Norton Shakespeare*. Based on the Oxford Edition. 2nd Eds. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, Katharine Eisaman Maus. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Co., 2009.

These are but two of the most famous examples of a conceit that finds expression in Shakespeare repeatedly, namely that human existence has no meaning other than to continue on toward death. As Harold Bloom puts it, "Lear echoes the Wisdom of Solomon, but the Scriptural authority for the pronouncement is Shakespeare's and not the Bible's. We are fools of time bound for the undiscovered country, more than we are children of God returning to heaven" (xxviii). Life is so "ping" that it's "pong."

This conception of the universe is of course not unique to Shakespeare, or any single thinker, but has been present throughout western history. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Milan Kundera illustrates the oppositional concepts of lightness and weight by juxtaposing Nietzsche's myth of the eternal return, which Nietzsche called "das schwerste gewicht," the heaviest of burdens, alongside the notion of a world in which things happen only once, a world of lightness, articulated by the German adage "einmal ist keinmal": what happens only once may as well have never happened at all. In so doing, he explored a question that fascinated Parmenides: which is better, lightness or weight? Of course, Kundera's Heideggerian novel gives no definitive answer to the "lightness/weight opposition" that Kundera's narrator calls the "most mysterious, most ambiguous of all," since, as John Rumrich suggests, "part of the mystery lies, as Tolstoy might agree, in the disposition of the subjective consciousness of the world" (170). This is, of course, why Kundera depicts a lightness that carries the heft of an unbearable weight, as well as why he writes novels instead of philosophy.

In tandem with the "einmal ist keinmal" conception of life without meaning or value, in Shakespeare there recurs a suggestion that life itself is no more real than theater; while by no means an abstraction, the very stuff of life is not something substantial, but composed of airy nothing, simply an illusion. Language itself is an abstraction from what is "real," and the business of human life bears the same relation to what is "real" as the King's Men bore to a packed Globe Theater. Shakespeare put the most famous expression of this notion in *As You Like It*, when the philosophical and melancholy Jacques famously declares that "All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women, merely Players" who "strut for an hour on stage" before the show ultimately ends in total oblivion, "sans everything" (2.7.150-77).[47] Perhaps the greatest example of this ontological lightness surfaces in *The Tempest*, when after the airy actors of his masque have melted into thin air Prospero suggests that

> like the baseless fabric of this vision,
> The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,
> The solemn temples, the great globe itself—
> Yea, all which it inherit—shall dissolve
> And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
> Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
> As dreams are made on, and our little life
> Is rounded with a sleep. (4.1.151-58)

Milton's cosmos did not accommodate the notion of nothing—nothing, by definition, cannot exist; for a monist materialist, everything that exists is something. For Milton, everything is part of the "one first matter all" (*PL* 5.472), the primordial material of chaos

[47] Citations of *As You Like It* refer to the Arden Shakespeare, Third Series. Ed. Juliet Dusinberre. London: Thomson Learning, 2004.

from which his God gave shape to the universe, and all intelligent beings will continue on for eternity. This is not so in Shakespeare, where at the very least the possibility of total non-existence stands on either end of the "brief candle" of human life.

All this is not to say that Milton's Shakespeare was not at all didactic, just that if life is bookended by oblivion, the purpose of poetry—like Hamlet's purpose of playing—is to "hold as 'twere the mirror up to Nature to show Virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure" (*Ham* 3.2.20-24): to instruct audiences in worldly, time-bound matters, and give audiences pleasure while they pass time until they die. Since the wisdom Shakespeare offers is distinctively temporal, for Milton—whose enthusiastic focus was eternal verses—it can never be anything to take too seriously, if seriously at all. But in Milton's world where time is without boundaries, the purpose of "true" poetry is to worship God and lead men in a spiritual battle that has eternal consequences.

This project will weave together several threads concerning the ways young Milton used Shakespeare as a source and counterpoint throughout his process of becoming the great, "capital 'M' Milton." I have found that his path to becoming the poet he aspired to be largely steers both toward and away from his greatest English predecessor, William Shakespeare, and is set against the backdrop of an ideological alliance Milton seeks to establish with two other poets in particular, Virgil and Spenser.[48] If, according to the anecdote, Milton told Dryden that Spenser was his "original," it is not

[48] I wish to point out that this alliance is neither stylistic nor political, though obviously it bears on both politics and style. I call this an "ideological" alliance because Milton is agreeing with Virgil and Spenser about the question of *how* poets should live and *what* their poetry should do.

only because they both eschewed the theatre, but because Milton agreed with Spenser on what it means to be a "true poet." The main threads of this project will include Milton's conception of the "true" poet—what characterizes the office of a true poet, how should a true poet live, what is the source of true poetry? An exploration of the competing views on the source of poetry open a window to the two poets' likewise competing views on such philosophical concepts as the nature of time, the nature of reality, and the value of life. In the works of Shakespeare, since the distinction between fantasy and reality collapses and life itself is so often indecipherable from a dream, and one that will later end in oblivion, many of Shakespeare's characters locate value only in the temporal world, especially Shakespeare's wise "fools," like Feste, who tend to find their highest values in earthly pleasures like laughter and sensual love. Life is not something to take too seriously since, indeed, it may not even be something at all. In Milton, quite the opposite is true; even air is physically something, rarefied matter, and life is quite real, no frivolous concern but something to take seriously. In short, for Milton, life and the way we live it—and more specifically the way a poet should live it—absolutely matters. This relative "lightness" and "weight" permeate Shakespeare and Milton, respectively, and serve as a unifying thread that will run throughout this study.

The four chapters are arranged in the chronological order of the poems they discuss, with the exception of "On Shakespeare" placed at the end mainly because the *Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity*, hereafter simply referred to as the Nativity Ode, makes a stronger plea for chapter one: it is Milton's birth poem and, of course, it comes first in Milton's 1645 *Poems*. But I also place the chapter dealing with "On Shakespeare"

last because it will benefit from the support it gains from the preceding three. Thus Chapter 1 will read Milton's Nativity Ode alongside Shakespeare's play set around the same midwinter holiday season, *Twelfth Night, Or What You Will*. Both works are set on and deal with the time of year that the three magi came bearing gifts to the newborn Christ, however Shakespeare and Milton depict this seasonal holiday in markedly different ways. While Shakespeare's comedic stage play celebrates (and pokes fun at) the "Feast of the Epiphany," Milton's "golden-age eclogue" mainly praises and presents itself as a gift to Milton's god. Thus in his Nativity Ode, Milton imitates Virgil and Spenser in offering a "golden-age" or "messianic" eclogue, which prophesies that in the future when a special child is born "time will run back" (135) to the ancient past when humans and nature existed in a perfectly untroubled state of peace. Endeavoring to restore the hierarchies that Shakespeare upsets in *Twelfth Night*—such as the authority of divine wisdom in relation to folly, or the authority of the Church to create a holiday commemorating the miraculous birth of a human on whom was conferred the height of divine authority—by setting up an opposition based on understanding time in two separate forms, Milton's poem argues that during this particular season, fools will drink, feast, and dance while wise men will offer gifts to Christ.

Further exploring this oppositional relation between wisdom and folly, chapter 2, "'Fantastic' Shakespeare: a Reading of Young Milton's Tempter," will limn the poets' two opposing ways of employing language by reading the "fantastic" character, the tempter, Comus, in Milton's *A Maske Presented at Ludlow Castle*, hereafter called *Comus*, alongside a pair of fantastic language-users in *Measure for Measure* and *Love's*

Labour's Lost, Lucio and Don Adriano de Armado, respectively. Milton's Shakespeare was a "fantastic" poet, which is to say he conformed to the present times in order to succeed in the theatrical marketplace—at the box office, as it were—and in his use of language to pursue those purposes, concerned himself more with giving the audience pleasure than with conveyance of what Milton thought of as "truth." Chapter 3 moves to *Lycidas*, Milton's death poem that is really about birth, reading in Milton's famous pastoral a characterization of himself as England's prophetic, "true poet," aspiring not to time-bound but to eternal fame, alongside the entirely different notions about questions of poetic fame that flow throughout Shakespeare's most famous non-dramatic poetry, The Sonnets. Thus this project begins by reading a birth poem that is also about death, and toward the end reads a "death" poem that is also about birth. As much as it sings of the human birth of Christ and the poetic birth of Milton, the Nativity Ode sings of the death of the pagan gods who formerly reigned. Similarly, as much as it sings the tragic death of a young poet, Edward King, *Lycidas* sings the birth of a young poet, Milton himself, destined for fame eternal.

The 4th and final chapter, "Too much conceiving: A New Reading of Milton's "On Shakespeare" travels back to the beginning of Milton's poetic career and offers a new perspective on the first verses of Milton's ever published in English. Until now, readers have long taken the meaning of the poem at face value, but I will suggest the "light elegy" reads quite differently than Milton's more serious works and is, therefore, rife with puns, double meanings, and caustic irony: while the poem surely affords some praise, by subtle equivocation it also mocks Shakespeare, and at every turn. It was no

doubt a glorious personal victory for Milton when the verses were actually published in the second folio edition of Shakespeare's works, 1632.[49]

In the years following 9/11, considering whether *Samson Agonistes* should be considered "a work in praise of terrorism" John Carey noted a "modern view of Milton as primarily interested in politics and only incidentally a poet" (15-16). This idea owes mostly, I think, to the onset of historically informed literary criticism, the wealth of information we enjoy concerning Milton and his life, and the fact that he was for many years heavily involved in the politics of his place and time. However, as far as it is a problem for Milton studies, I contend that this proves an issue more for reading the work of the mature Milton; it was after his trip to Italy and the outbreak of the Civil War that the poet turned so attentively toward politics. During his youth, he was far more than "incidentally" a poet; he was virtually obsessed with the idea. Aspiring not only to be a poet, (itself something of a crazy notion), Milton aspired to be *the* "true poet" of his own English people after the fashion of a *vates* poet like Virgil; in the words of Guillory, the *vates* is an "inspired poet-priest," whose work is "inseparable from the sacred function" he performs in society. Thus, the poems produced by a *vates* are not ordinary poems, but have a status elevated to the same level as holy scripture. Young Milton took his poetic vocation quite seriously, and he wanted the world to know about it.

C.W.R.D. Moseley notes with impressive sensitivity and grace that before reading Milton's devotional poetry

> it is necessary to stress some facts about religious poetry which in our age

[49] In contemporary parlance, one might say that Milton "folio-bombed" his great predecessor.

> are so easily overlooked (though they are obvious enough) and which sharply affect the way we can read individual poems. In the first place, what we loosely call 'religion' is deadly serious: Christianity and other great religions (as well as atheism) are making statements about the cosmos which must be either right or wrong, and it is intellectual dishonesty, and worse, to pretend that religion is as optional and unimportant a matter for a person as the football team he supports or the color of the tie he wears. Moreover, the great religions cannot all be right (though they could all be wrong), for the major religions of the world are making mutually exclusive statements about the nature of the universe. Thus religious poetry by convinced Christians—such as Milton—is not a serious game, as even the most serious political or love poetry can be, but a response to a unique Event, in which the Creator of all of us intervened at a datable moment in a specific place by taking humanity upon Himself. (97)

Moseley's point is crucial to keep in mind. As I write this dissertation, the phrase "Je Suis Charlie" circulates the media and fires are burning in France where people riot; recently, two Muslims—an iconoclastic religion—carried assault rifles into a French newspaper office during the workday and started shooting people because the newspaper had published cartoon depictions of the prophet Mohammed. What one person sees as material for a good joke, the next person sees as a matter of such gravity that it would be hard for most of us to empathize and understand their perspective. Therefore with regard to Milton's religion—or more specifically to the point, his claim to prophetic inspiration—proper handling of his poetics requires the careful reader to exercise a bit of that special quality John Keats located "so enormously" in Shakespeare: "I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (43). Such will be necessary to understanding Milton's relationship to his work, grounded in a religious sensibility

quite foreign to most of us who read him today. Moseley soberly elaborates the nature of this difficulty: "To expose [Milton's] sense of prophetic impulse is, unquestionably, to worry the tact of the scholar and, arguably, to tax the good will of the poet's audience. For many of us cannot 'believe' in this phenomenon . . . none is more likely to be more unpalatable to his modern audience than prophetic inspiration" (12, 15). And yet, stipulating this poetic inspiration, what James Holly Hanford called the "centre" of Milton's "spiritual biography," will enable us to understand the development of a young poet who, in the words of William Kerrigan, earnestly "believed himself a prophet" (*Prophetic* 10-11).

Chapter 1: "Time will run back:" Milton, Shakespeare, and the Nativity Ode

> Methinks sometimes I have no more wit than a Christian or an ordinary man has; but I am a great eater of beef, and I believe that does harm to my wit. (*TN* 1.3.74-77)[1]

> For Younkers, Palinode, such follies fitte,
> But we tway bene men of elder witt. (*SC* 17-18)[2]

Young Milton sometimes used to write poems literally on things. The title of "On Time" announces temporality as the subject, but also puns on the word "on," since Milton's markings in the Trinity College Manuscript suggest that he imagined the verses "to be set on a clock case."[3] David Masson tells us that the original of "On Shakespeare" was likewise drafted literally on a volume of Shakespeare's works, "on the blank leaf of a copy of the Folio . . . of 1623" (236).[4] The poems on Hobson the mail carrier are both

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[1] These lines are spoken by Sir Andrew Aguecheek. Keir Elam notes in the Arden 3 edition that "'Ague' (pronounced as two syllables) was a generic term in Early Modern English for a fever or fit of shaking; 'cheek' probably has both its modern meanings: facial part . . . and buttock. Sir Andrew's composite surname thus suggests leanness . . . paleness and cowardice. It may also imply, more literally, a sickly disposition" (158). At any rate, Sir Andrew is a laughable character. All references to *Twelfth Night* shall be made to Elam's edition.

[2] In Edmund Spenser's month of "Maye" in *The Shepheards Calendar: Containing Twelve Eclogues Proportionable to the Twelve Months*, a character named Piers—in opposition to a pleasure-loving shepherd named Palinode—presents a shining example of the Christian worldview regarding the role of the poet that Milton will adopt for himself. Namely, Piers stresses to his interlocutor that certain pleasures are fit for younger men, but that the older and wiser sort dedicate their time on graver matters.

[3] Kerrigan, Rumrich, and Fallon note: "originally something was written before 'set'—probably 'to be.' But we do not know whether the author considered 'to be set on a clock case' before he struck it out, as a subtitle or an alternative title" (58).

[4] This would probably have been the first folio copy belonging to Milton's father. One imagines the boy poet back from college, pouring over literature at his father's house with a score of books to choose from

written like epitaphs as though to be etched in stone on Hobson's grave, and *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*, hereafter referred to as the Nativity Ode, was written both about and literally on the morning of Christ's birth. Gordon Teskey imagines "sometime at or just before dawn on Christmas morning 1629," the young poet was "probably home from Cambridge, on the upper floor of his family house" (66) when he awoke and, gazing out his window at the sun coming up over London, began his ode, "This is the month, and this the happy morn" (1). However one cannot write on a morning the way one can write on a clock case, or paper, or stone; something distinguishes the two types of material on which poems can be written in the literal, physical sense. Considering that Milton conceived the whole universe as composed of one material substance, the early poems tend to suggest that time, like all other entities in Milton's universe, comes in disparate forms.[5] Thus writing on two different forms of time, the young poet underscores the difference between human, earthly time, as constructed by man, which comes in quite limited supply, bookended by the boundaries of birth and death, and is generally used for the purposes of measuring something else, and time in an eternal, boundless form: that

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and, upon picking up the folio, spending ample time with Shakespeare before stamping his mark upon the quite fancy and expensive volume before placing it back on the shelf.

[5] John Rumrich has pointed out that Milton reversed Aristotle's analysis of form and matter ("theanthropos," 64). For Aristotle, form is that which all entities have in common—form is universal—and matter is what individuates one thing from the next—matter is particular. So if we take, for example, two men, Palinode and Piers, Aristotle would say that they share a common form: human. Where they differ, therefore, is in the matter of which they are composed: one is composed of "Palinode" matter, the other is composed of "Piers" matter. For Milton, it is just the opposite. A monist materialist, Milton thought all things were composed of one matter. Material composition is the universal factor that all things share; form is where they differ. So in his analysis, Palinode and Piers are composed of the same matter, like everything, but they differ in their forms. I am not sure at what age Milton's "monist materialist" views crystalize for him, but I think they begin to show even in his earlier works, but not without some tension created by a tendency toward binary oppositional thinking that will disappear later, as he begins to think of difference not in kind but by degree.

very "something else" that constitutes the material dimension of our reality the clockmaker endeavors to measure.

In "On Time," Milton invests these two temporal forms with varying degrees of value, expressing that the "mortal dross" of the passing hours represents "no more than what is false and vain" (5-6), as opposed to time in its eternal form: after earthly time has "run out" its "race . . . / Then long eternity shall greet our bliss / With an individual kiss" (11-12). For the 21-year-old Milton, still heavily involved with negotiating the terms of his poetic vocation, this distinction holds the highest importance: indeed, only the verses of an eternal poet like Virgil or Spenser are invested with the type of poetic authority Milton sought for himself.[6] This chapter will take Milton's conceptions of time in two opposing forms as a starting point from which to explore the possible connections between his pastoral "eclogue" set around the same time of the year and Shakespeare's comedy set on and about the very same time, the midwinter holiday surrounding the Solstice. Doing so promises to reveal Milton's implicit statements about the proper role of the poet in society.[7] The young poet's portrayal of a locus of time in two forms enables him to express his self-affirmation as an eternal poet, providing a point of contrast

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6 This notion finds lucid expression in John Guillory's monograph, *Poetic Authority: Spenser, Milton, and Literary History*.

7 For a fine discussion of how in the "'Nativity Ode' . . . Milton wrestles, sometimes implicitly, with his identity as a poet and as a man," which rests on the "remarkable continuity in Milton's self-construction" during Milton's youth and throughout his life, see Stephen M Fallon, *Milton's Peculiar Grace: Self-Representation and Authority.* Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2007. pp. 53-62. For a perspective that warns against reading the Nativity Ode as autobiographical, see J. Martin Evans, *Miltonic Moment*. Lexington: the Kentucky UP, 1998. pp. 11-12. See also: William Riley Parker, *Milton: A Biography, 2 vols.* Oxford: Clarendon, 1968. 1:70. See also: Louis Martz, *Milton: Poet of Exile,* 2nd ed. New Haven: Yale UP, 1968. 52. For views that argue the poem dramatizes an experience analogous to Puritan conversion, see: Arthur Barker, "The Pattern of Milton's 'Nativity Ode,'" in *University of Toronto Quarterly* 10 (1941): 170. See also: A.S.P. Woodhouse, "Notes on Milton's Early Development," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 13 (1943): 73.

alongside his conceit of Shakespeare as a "time-server," concerned only with the effects of his work in the present, humanly time.[8]

Keir Elam notes that there are likewise two "different perceptions and different levels of time at work in *Twelfth Night*," and these "differences find expression in the play's notorious 'double' time scheme" (78). However the two schemes of time in Shakespeare's comedy would have seemed to Milton like dual expressions of time in the same one, humanly form; this is the "mortal dross" he mentions with disdain in "On Time." Professor Elam, with whom I do not disagree, describes the play's two time schemes as "differences in the rhythm of events between, on the one hand, the relatively slow development of the overall narrative frame and, on the other, the hectic comings and goings onstage, conducted at a more rapid pace" (78). For example, "Valentine congratulates Viola-as-Cesario on becoming the duke's favorite in 'but three days'" (1.4.3.), while "Antonio informs Orsino that he has known Cesario/Sebastian 'for three months,' and the duke confirms that 'Three months this youth hath tended upon me'" (5.1.95). But what here may seem like differing forms of time to Shakespeare, or his secular, Elizabethan audience, would have seemed to Milton like simple misunderstandings, human, all too human. This and other thematic parallels invite a reading that would put the two Christmas pieces alongside one another, revealing the disparate ways Milton and Shakespeare approached and conceived of their poetic tasks.

[8] At this point, a more in-depth study would explore the notion of money making, probably the poetic purpose most important to Milton's Shakespeare; in Spenser's "October," Piers reprimands Palinode for arguing that poets should use their art to make money.

Rejecting a traditional view of Milton's Nativity Ode that would locate the "routing of the pagan dieties" at the poem's "intellectual core," Edward Tayler argues that the poem's "main theme" in fact "concerns time," as Milton "specifies the relation of this event in time to God's eternal plan" (34-35). Like many scholars, Tayler rightly notes that the poem makes a bold claim to something like time travel, emphasizing

> the 'presentness' of the past, first inviting us to 'See how' the 'Star-led wizards haste' from the East and then admitting the poet into the theological landscape: 'O run, prevent [come before] them with thy humble ode.' It is 'now' the actual Christmas of the Nativity and not merely its calendrical commemoration in 1629 . . . The 'Now' of the Nativity Ode may therefore also be considered a poetic nunc stans, glancing simultaneously toward present and past and conflating the two events separated in Time as though viewed from the vantage of eternity. (35)

Tayler's phrasing does a nice job of bringing together the elements of Milton's verses that illuminate the atemporal "vantage of eternity" from which Milton seems to be approaching what is, essentially, a moment in time, at which the narrator is and invites the reader to be present; look, "see how" the "star-led wizards haste." Lowry Nelson has termed this trick Milton's effort to bring into "paradoxical contemporaneity" his two "chief time planes" of human history and boundless eternity. (42). More recently, Christopher Tilmouth reckons that when viewed from an eternal perspective, "all these moments are eternally co-present, and the effect of Milton's dynamic manipulation of tenses is to encourage precisely that perspective: to afford a sense of immediate presentness to the events in Christian eschatology the ode invokes" (283). Milton's monist materialist conception of time and space was such that they can have no

boundaries or limitations; eternity stretches endlessly in all directions, so any limitations on time are illusory, humanly imposed. C.W.R.D. Moseley has noticed:

> Milton is not . . . thinking of Christmas as merely an anniversary, but as an event that takes place both in and out of time. If God's existence is eternal, then (as Boethius pointed out in the Consolation of Philosophy, v), all times are present with Him in an eternal Now. If Christ was God Incarnate, then He experienced time both sequentially as a Man and instantaneously as God: so the Incarnation and the Crucifixion are literally happening 'now.' (122)

For Moseley, Rosemond Tuve also observed that the poem "halts time" as if speaking from the temporal perspective of "just before dawn on the first Christmas morning," opening the way "for this morning to be both the first Christmas and all others, so that in the poem we move with ease from one kind of time to the other, from history (reading literaliter) to poetry" (45). In the Nativity Ode, then, Milton's profoundest and perhaps most puzzling statement could be paraphrased as follows: "holy song" has the power, "if it enwrap our fancy long," to transcend the boundaries of time, sometimes to take us forward, sometimes to make time "run back, and fetch the age of gold" (135). For as Moseley puts it, the "main focus of the poem is not the incarnation of Christ but the cosmic effects of that incarnation" (100). What Milton considered "true poetry" would have a real, palpable effect on the world—and for Milton this is not culturally specific, this means the whole world—leading to an eventual restoration of humanity and nature to a former state of lost paradise.[9]

[9] In *Paradise Lost*, Milton's God describes this time when "The world shall burn, and from her ashes spring / New Heav'n and Earth, wherein the just shall dwell / And after all thir tribulations long / See golden days, fruitful of golden deeds, / With Joy and Love triumphing, and fair Truth. / Then thou thy regal Scepter shalt lay by, / For regal Scepter then no more shall need, / God shall be All in All" (3.334-41).

Discussing the "enormous potential for variation, invention, and metamorphosis" within the pastoral form, Patrick Cullen identifies Milton's Nativity Ode as a "golden-age pastoral, sometimes called 'prophetic' or 'messianic' pastoral," the "chief model" of which being "of course, Virgil's fourth eclogue" (1559). Writes Cullen,

> The golden-age eclogue can be defined as the celebration of a figure, generally though not necessarily a child, and his illustrious parents in terms of the return of the golden age and the reign of Saturn. The child is usually about to be born, as in Virgil's fourth eclogue . . . or has recently been born, as in . . . Milton's *Nativity Ode* . . . In addition, the child is generally portrayed as existing among the gods, if in fact he is not himself a god. (1559)

According to Cullen's description, Milton's poem seems indisputably to fit the main, classical requirements of the particular genre he means to imitate, and Milton adapts the classical version to fit his Christian worldview; the reign of Saturn, therefore, in Milton's cosmos, becomes the return of Christ. Cullen continues that to the Golden-age are commonly attributed two groups of characteristics: "first, the reformation and perfection of nature, and secondly, the reformation and perfection of man" (1560). A.S.P. Woodhouse also observed Milton's poem follows the tradition of Virgil's fourth eclogue "which heralds the return of the Golden Age under Augustus and associates it with the birth of a child" (34). With regard to the former perfection, golden-age eclogues tend to portray such characteristics as a return to environmental paradise—eternal Spring, for example—and with regard to the latter, they tend to portray the end of war and return to peace, abolition of toil, return of lost human virtues, abolition of private property, and a return to natural law. As Noam Reisner notes, "young Milton was clearly captivated by

the Spenserian notion of a blissful earthly paradise in which the forces of life, death, and mutability are locked, paradoxically, into the perpetual rhythms of immanent, as opposed to transcendental, eternity" (161). Thus in stark contrast to Shakespeare's mid-winter comedy depicting the world in disorder, Milton's "golden-age eclogue" depicted precisely the opposite: the world's eventual return to a state of order in a moment that fuses the future and past in the present.

While the specific echoes of Shakespeare in this poem are considerably fewer in comparison with *Comus* or *L'Allegro*—a fact that, I would argue, cannot be accidental—even in the Nativity Ode resound a few that are undeniable. When Milton's speaker describes the peace brought upon the ocean by the arrival of his kingly subject, "The winds with wonder whist, / Smoothly the waters kissed" (64-65), we hear also a rendition of Ariel's song from *The Tempest*, "Full Fathom Five," from which Milton borrowed so heavily in *Comus*: "Curtsied when you have, and kiss'd / The wild waves whist" (1.2.379-80). In the Nativity Ode, when Milton describes the "flocking shadows pale" who "*Troop* to the infernal jail," at the break of day when "Each fettered ghost slips to his several grave" (232-34), we are reminded of Puck's description of the same phenomenon, from the very same scene in Shakespeare: at sunrise, "ghosts wandering here and there / *Troop* home to churchyards" (3.2.382-83). And yet—though at this point during his development the young Milton could not get the mystical music of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest* out of his mind—it is less the stylistic influence and more the subject matter of this unassuming pair, Milton's "birth poem" welcoming Christ into the

world, and Shakespeare's comedy about secular midwinter customs, asking to be read side by side.[10]

As Milton would his Nativity Ode, Shakespeare set *Twelfth Night, or What You Will* during the commemorative time around which the three wise men brought their gifts to the newborn Christ, known to Elizabethans as the Feast of the Epiphany: a midwinter custom taking root in "the Roman Saturnalia, with its pagan spirit of gift giving, sensual indulgence, and what Stephen Greenblatt calls a "satirical hostility to those who would curb merriment" (333). Greenblatt tells us that for Shakespeare's contemporaries "Twelfth Night, the Feast of the Epiphany" marked a time when

> A rigidly hierarchical social order that ordinarily demanded deference, sobriety, and strict obedience to authority temporarily gave way to raucous rituals of inversion: young boys were crowned for a day as bishops and carried through the streets in mock religious processions; abstemiousness was toppled by bouts of heavy drinking and feasting; the spirit of parody, folly, and misrule reigned briefly in places normally reserved for stern-faced moralists and sober judges. The fact that these festivities were associated with Christian holidays—the Epiphany marked the visit of the Three Kings to Bethlehem to worship the Christ child—did not altogether obscure the continuities with pagan winter rituals such as the Roman Saturnalia, with its comparably explosive release from everyday discipline into a disorderly realm of belly laugher and belly cheer. Puritans emphasized these continuities in launching a fierce attack on the Elizabethan festive calendar and its whole ethos, just as they attacked the theater for what they saw as its links with paganism, idleness, and sexual license. (446-47)

Whether Milton would have been considered one of these "stern-faced moralists" or "sober judges" we cannot be sure, but the letter he wrote to Diodati during this season in

[10] In terms of style, Milton's Nativity Ode follows other poets far more closely, in particular Spenser and Virgil.

1629—*Elegy 6*—suggests that Milton did not approve it, however kind he was in expressing that to his friend (to whom, sometimes chiding Milton for not knowing when to take a break from his literary labors, it would come as no surprise). Most Puritans, though, would have opposed the festival since it turns an otherwise Christian holiday upside down. Therefore Shakespeare's play resonates with the very festival that was concurrent with its performance, which Elizabethans celebrated by way of chaotic upending of all types of authority. Even in its very title, *Twelfth Night* performs an inversion of typical power relations. The author decrees the name of this play is *Twelfth Night, Or What You Will*; it can be whatever you want it to be. There is no ultimate authority, no author to insist on any particular title, or to whom we can appeal, so call it whatever you will. By giving the title a built-in challenge to its own authority, Shakespeare cleverly expresses the mood of secular Elizabethans during the play's seasonal setting, the "Festival of the Epiphany," a time of rule-breaking and revelry, fueled by intemperate eating and drinking. Whatever people chose to call it, the mid-winter festival itself has roots in the Pagan ritualistic "Saturnalia," an ancient Roman festival characterized by the same culinary indulgences. The title of Shakespeare's play, therefore, emphasizes that the ceremony itself, known as "Twelfth Night," has some kind of existence apart from its name—Romans called it "Saturnalia," Elizabethans the "Epiphany." Whether based on your religious proclivities, or the fact that you, like Sir Toby Belch, just like to have a drink of sack, you will decide for yourself what makes the season special. Thus *Twelfth Night* subverts the Christian authority that would define the naturalistic, mid-winter marker as Milton does, in terms specifically Christian.

Keir Elam notes that during these seasonal revels, which often involved putting on such plays as Shakespeare's, "Protestant fundamentalists reserved special bile for Christmas misrule as a mode of spectacle, at which, in the words of Protestant hack Philip Stubbes, whose attitude toward theatres as "schools of mischief" that draw people away from God resembles the disdain of Malvolio, whose name in Italian means literally "ill will"): 'the foolish people they look, they stare, they laugh, they fleer . . . to see these godly pageants solemnized in this sort'" (20). Now famous for his extreme opposition to theatre, calling it a "Venus Pallace" and "Sathan's synagogue, to worship devils and betray Christ Iesus" (*Abuses* 143), Stubbes voiced the opinion of many English Protestants during the early modern era. As Louis Montrose puts it, "playhouses were attacked as the breeding ground of plague and vice . . . inefficient workers and dangerous ideas" (48). In 1597, the Lord Mayor and Alderman urged the Privy Council to issue a moratorium on stage plays because they are a "speciall cause of corrupting," since they contain "nothinge but unchaste matters" and the type of people who go to plays, "beinge of the base & refuze sort," tend to the imitation and "not to the avoidinge the like vices" which these plays represent" (4:322). Certainly, it seems, Stubbes or this Lord Mayor would be the type at which Shakespeare meannt to poke fun in *Twelfth Night.*[11] To Malvolio's interruption of the festivities in 2.3, "Have you no wit, manners nor honesty but to gabble like tinkers at this time of night? Do ye make an alehouse of my lady's house?" (2.3.86-88), Sir Toby Belch responds "Dost thou think because thou art virtuous there shall be no more cakes and ale?" Thus in his "school of mischief," as Stubbes

[11] Stubbes was far from alone.

would have it, Shakespeare stages a confrontation between two early modern mindsets: on the one hand is the irreligious reveler, like Feste and Sir Toby Belch, and on the other the religious ascetic, like Philip Stubbes or Malvolio. The latter, then, personifies an austere sentiment common at the time to Protestants like Stubbes (whose writing, for example, vehemently opposed church-ales.)[12]

Staging the early modern struggle between festivity and sobriety, in characteristic Shakespearean fashion, *Twelfth Night* works to erase the binary and makes both seem foolish in their own way, as the former is mainly represented in the person of Feste, the clown, and the latter Malvolio, the "kind of" Puritan who poses as a wise man but is made into an ass. Joseph Hunter saw in Malvolio as a "grand attack" on Puritans, a "systematic design" of holding Puritanism "up to ridicule" (397). As Christopher Baker notes, at this point in history Puritans were eager for social reform, and thus "became familiar objects of mockery in literature of the day, and the name 'Puritan' itself gradually broadened to become a pejorative term for any narrow-minded or self-righteous person regardless of religious persuasion" (46).[13] Typically for Shakespeare, it is the clown, Feste, who enjoys the opportunity to announce his final appraisal of Malvolio's folly, and he does so by quoting scripture, *Exodus* 10:22: "I say there is no darkness but ignorance, in which thou art more puzzled than the Egyptians in their fog" (4.2.42-44).

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[12] Philip Stubbes wrote against the use of church ales and cakes in *Anatomy of the Abuses in England in Shakespeare's Youth, A.D. 1583.* London: The New Shakespeare Society, 1877. 147.

[13] For another, funnier example of this ridiculous Puritan in Shakespeare, see *1Henvy IV*; Falstaff perfectly exemplifies the empty, outward show of religion Maria rails on in *Twelfth Night*, when he reprimands Prince Hal: "O, thou hast damnable iteration, and art indeed able to corrupt a saint. Thou hast done much harm upon me, Hal, God forgive thee for it! Before I knew thee, Hal, I knew nothing, and now am I, if a man should speak truly, little better than one of the wicked" (1.2.90-95).

Little wonder, then, that the Puritan Milton—at this point in his life most concerned with establishing authority for his poetry—renders verses on this festive season that speak to a restoration of order, both political and religious, as well as in the common sense notions of wisdom and its relationship to folly.[14]

The indifferent phrase that serves as the comedy's subtitle moreover illustrates a subversion of authority when Olivia puts her Steward, Malvolio, in charge to answer the door and get rid of the visitor—whom she rightly assumes to be a messenger from Orsino—by instructing him: "Go you, Malvolio. If it be a suit from the count, I am sick, or not at home. *What you will* to dismiss it" (italics mine) (1.5.104-05). Malvolio receives license to do anything he likes to get rid of the unwanted visitor and, though we can never know what he actually said (because Shakespeare does not put the encounter on stage), the returned Steward reports to Olivia that he recited the lines just exactly as she had instructed. In other words, offered a potential allowance to do whatever he likes, Malvolio chooses rather strictly to follow orders, relaying Olivia's lies to the visitor and thereby makes a subtle mockery of that character type who, like Philip Stubbes, would have refused to take part in the drunken revelries of the mid-winter celebration. The visitor at the door is of course Viola, in the guise of Cesario, delivering Orsino's message of desire; and little does Olivia know she will soon fall in love with the messenger. Therefore, in a symbolic way, the scene depicts the very element of the human condition that Shakespeare interrogates: when desire knocks at one's door, one can do whatever

[14] One might argue that we get another, far friendlier rendition of this dialectic in *Elegy 6*, the Latin verse letter to Charles Diodati to which the young poet attached his late achievement.

one will to dismiss it, but stubbornly does it refuse to go away. Olivia's order for Malvolio to do whatever [he] will to dismiss it, represents, perhaps, the human inevitability that in whatever way we choose, we must all deal with desire knocking at our doors. By this logic, Malvolio could be said to represent the religious/ascetic side in a debate concerning the proper way to confront this reality resulting in what William Kerrigan refers to in *The Sacred Complex* as an "impossible physiology" (55); Puritan Malvolio deals with desire by strictly conforming to authority and sending the visitor away, choosing the religious asceticism of Angelo in *Measure for Measure*, or more comically, all the gentlemen in *Love's Labour's Lost*. And like those other ascetics, Malvolio fails hilariously. Set during an ancient yearly festival celebrating subversion of authority, *Twelfth Night, or What You Will* thus mocks the religious authority of Christianity and, most importantly for Milton, mocks what Stephen Fallon terms the "ascetic imperative, the call to chaste purity" (54) which the young Milton believed was required of the true poet.

Regarding this early modern debate about how best to celebrate the mid-winter holiday, David Bevington notes that as a Christian play that stages an opposition between the perspectives of Malvolio and Feste, *Twelfth Night* "underscores [Shakespeare's] commitment to mirth" (333).[15] The implication of setting a play that inverts the relationship and, indeed, questions the very distinction between wise men and fools, on a day that commemorates the famous Christian "wise men," suggests that those who deny

[15] Perhaps Milton, too, recognized this commitment in Shakespeare's mid-winter comedy, which would explain the playwright's presence by name in *L'Allegro*, a poem dedicated to honoring the goddess "Mirth," and practically filled with Shakespearean echoes.

themselves sensual pleasures because they want to acquire the reputation of "wise men" are truly the fools. In this implied dialectic, Shakespeare offers as liaison for Puritans (of whom Milton was one) the most despicable character in the play. Unlikable by design, Malvolio turns out to be a serious-faced Puritan who, as soon as he gets fooled into thinking Olivia could be in love with him and—vain fool that he is—senses an opportunity to gain social power, but ultimately becoming humiliated, subject to harsh comic ridicule, and even imprisonment. It goes hard for the Christian in the play, whom Maria laughingly tags a "time-pleaser." Also known as a "time-server," this would be someone who self-servingly adapts his or her views to fit prevailing circumstances, especially when it involved an avoidance of doing real work. Or in the words of Maria, "an affectioned ass that cons state without book and utters it by great swaths" (2.3.143-45). For if they cannot be truly wise, at least they can enjoy the social benefits of being believed wise, or devout by everyone else.

In his staged inversions of authority, Shakespeare often dissolved the usual oppositions between binary categories such as wisdom and folly; Maria's description of a time-pleaser well fits Gratiano's notion of those who put on a stern face so that others will think them wise. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Gratiano states a direct inversion of the categories of wisdom and folly, giving his clever perspective from which they who play the fool seem to live better than they who are only wise in reputation:

> There are a sort of men whose visages
> Do cream and mantle like a standing pond
> And do a willful stillness entertain
> With purpose to be dressed in an opinion
> Of wisdom, gravity, profound conceit,

> As who should say, "I am Sir Oracle,
> And when I ope my lips, let no dog bark!"
> O my Antonio, I do know of these
> That therefore only are reputed wise
> For saying nothing, when, I am very sure,
> If they should speak would almost damn those ears
> Which, hearing them, would call their brothers fools. (1.1.88-99)

Gratiano's observation, which harmonizes nicely with Feste's songs, echoes the claims that many "wise men" take life too seriously, only pretending to be wise so they can be thought wise by others. The true wise men are, by Gratiano's logic, those whom the latter sort would call "fools" (like himself), who take life too lightly. These opposing views are, of course, dependent on the aforementioned opposing views on time: the wisdom of Feste and Gratiano makes sense because they recognize that life is short, and hardship will eventually come soon enough, so one should enjoy life by having a glass of wine and some laughs before Death comes to reap his due. Farhang Zabeeh notes that in Shakespeare's plays, fools are often referred to as "philosophers" (78). Elaborating the reason for this phenomenon, Leszak Kolakowski writes that in "every era the jester's philosophy exposes as doubtful what seems to be most unshakeable, reveals the contradiction in what appears obvious and incontrovertible, derides common sense, and reads sense in the absurd" (35). Perhaps approaching and swerving away from these issues raised in Shakespeare's mid-winter play, Milton wrote a poem to make his own statement about how wise men celebrate the midwinter holiday: not with the drunken revelry of Feste and Sir Toby Belch, but as do the "star-led wizards," by offering gifts of worship to Christ.

Shakespeare's holiday comedy poses some serious questions about the status of religion, poetry, language, morality, indeed, the value of life itself, offering Malvolio as the sole representative of Christian asceticism. In terms of audience likability, as his name suggests, Malvolio is the very opposite of Benvolio from *Romeo and Juliet*—and like Angelo in *Measure for Measure* he will inevitably pursue the same fleshly desires everyone does and be scorned, upbraided, and mocked as a fool. A particularly bad Christian, Malvolio, when asked by Feste what he think of the Pythagorean notion that a spirit could inhabit the body of a bird, Malvolio responds in the negative: "I think nobly of the soul and no way approve his opinions" (4.2.47). What does not occur to Malvolio, would have certainly occurred to Milton, and may or may not be on Feste's mind is the biblical account of Christ's baptism when "the Holy Ghost descended in a bodily shape like a dove upon him" (*Luke* 3:22).[16] For certain, Shakespeare's comedy set around the holiday central to Christians featured more than a few jabs at religious devotees, such as John Milton.[17]

If we read the Nativity Ode as a response to *Twelfth Night*, the two authors' works set on and about the Christmas season, Milton's "golden-age eclogue" endeavors to restore the authority to the religion he took seriously by rooting it in the magic of the incarnation and, in so doing, alludes to a debate in Spenser about the very question of Shakespeare's play: whether it is better to live the ascetic life, denying oneself sensual

[16] The "dove" through which the Holy Ghost baptizes Christ appears in all four gospels, (which is somewhat of a rarity), as well as Milton's later "brief epic," *Paradise Regained.*

[17] It would not have been peculiar for Milton to be personally roused by *Twelfth Night*, as many scholars have commented on the "audience's uneasy sense of being caught up in pleasures of a dubious kind" (8), as the "spectator plays the part of co-protagonist" (7). Ralph Berry argues *Twelfth Night* forces a "moral responsibility" on its audience, with the "ultimate effect" of making the "audience ashamed of itself" (119).

pleasures in pursuit of something higher, or whether it is better to indulge in the sensual enjoyments of an existence that is inevitably fleeting. When Milton says the pre-Christian poets had no idea that "the mighty Pan" had just taken on human flesh, he echoes a phrase from Spenser and thereby alludes to an alternative poetic iteration of the same debate in Spenser's exploration of the proper social role of the poet in *The Shepheardes Calendar*.[18] As David Daiches has noted, Milton follows Spenser closely in the Nativity Ode, which "shows Milton working within the Spenserian tradition," including "clear echoes of Spenser himself" (38). Moreover it could be said that Milton demonstrates his intentional alignment with Spenser in the final lines, which imitate a Spenserian alexandrine. Perhaps, then, since Shakespeare's comedy does not include any voicing of an opinion suitable to Milton, he responds by alluding to one in Spenser, who put views with which Milton could agree in the mouth of a character named Piers.

In Spenser's "May," two shepherds—Palinode and Piers—argue about the best way for shepherds to live.[19] Like Feste and Sir Toby Belch, Palinode stresses that life is short and, therefore, rather than deny themselves sensual pleasure, shepherds should enjoy life as much as possible while they can:

> What shoulden shepheards other things tend,
> Then, sith their God his good does them send,

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[18] Noting the generic link between Milton's Nativity Ode and Spenser's *The Shepheardes Calendar*, Patrick Cullen discusses how Milton's "golden-age eclogue" imitates Spenser's "golden-age eclogue" that is his "April." Kerrigan, Rumrich, and Fallon point out this link to Spenser in a note to their Modern Library Edition.

[19] I am working off the notion that in pastoral verses we may freely equate "shepherd" with "poet," even though it can also refer to clergy who do not, in fact, busy themselves with writing poetry. It should also be noted that "October" involves another like discussion—again, with Piers as the spokesman with whom Milton would have agreed—more specifically about how poets should live. It is in many ways analogous to how shepherds should live as voiced in "May."

Reapen the fruite thereof, that is pleasure,
The while they here liven at ease and leisure? (63-66)

He continues:

How shoulden shepheardes live, if not so?
What! Should they pynen in payne and woe?
Nay, say I thereto, by my deare borrowe,
If I may rest, I nill live in sorroewe.
Sorrowe need not be hastened on,
For he will come, without calling, anone. (148-52)

Why make hard times for ourselves when we know that, as mortals, hard times are coming soon enough? Here Palinode sounds like several of Shakespeare's more hedonistic characters, such as Venus trying to woo Adonis (save that she is a goddess and therefore relieved of the burden of mortality), Gratiano, the speaker of the sonnets to the young man or, in our text, Sir Toby Belch who drunkenly avers that "care's an enemy to life" (*TN* 1.3.2). Moreover, as the next chapter will discuss, we hear another iteration of this argument in the lines of Milton's Comus, a character modeled after Shakespeare. According to this line of thought, the important thing about life is to enjoy it while it lasts. But in response to this position, Piers—whose name recalls the devout title character in William Langland's *Piers Plowman*—claims that he pities these frivolous shepherds who "mislive in leudnes and lust," since they are going to lose their sheep and get in trouble with Pan:

While they, letting their sheepe run at large,
Passen their time, that should be sparely spent,
In lustihede and wanton meryment.
Thilke same bene shepheardes for the Devils stedde,
That playen while their flockes be unfedde:

> Well is it seene theyr sheepe bene not their owne,
> That letten them runne at random alone . . .
> I muse, what account both these will make;
> The one for the hire which he doth take,
> And thither for leaving his Lords taske,
> When great Pan account of shepeherdes shall aske. (40-46, 51-54)

Milton believed poets had a real responsibility, being as Philip Sydney had put it, the "unacknowledged legislators" of our world, and that bad poets were like bad shepherds "letting their sheepe run at large": bad poetry entails a weakened moral fabric for society. This conception of the poet's responsibility as an agent for strengthened social morality pleased Milton well. He adopted it for himself and cited it often. Alluding to the notion expressed in the *New Testament* parable of the talents, Piers voices a more serious perspective that never gets voiced in *Twelfth Night*, a play that King Charles I referred to as the "gulling of Malvolio," and one which makes no distinction between a puritan like Prynne and a puritan like Milton. Perhaps in Milton's allusion to this dialogue in *The Shepheards Calendar*, the young poet chimes in on the debate and thereby limns what he considers a more suitable Puritan example than Malvolio.

Spenser's Piers also sings in harmony with Milton's conception of time, which can be found in the other major literary allusion made in the Nativity Ode: Virgil's *4th Eclogue* (4). In lines clearly influential upon Milton's speaker, Spenser's spiritually minded Piers ensures the worldly Palinode that "The time was once, and may again retorne, / (For ought may happen, that hath bene beforne)" (103-04). This cyclical model of time matches Virgil's, who likewise sings that as the reign of Saturn begins the "great line of the centuries begins anew" (4). Milton's poem is in some ways a revision of

Virgil's, yet it is also more than that: it represents his imagined Christian realization of what seems a prophecy in Virgil, as well as an apology explaining his somewhat troubled recognition of his great debt to a pagan poetic tradition. Deviating from the cyclical conceit of time in Virgil and Spenser, Milton replaces it with one that is linear, yet still unbounded. Milton knew he had to reconcile his Christianity with his substantial debt to a pagan literary tradition, thus the endeavor Woodhouse locates at the "intellectual core" of the poem: the surmounting of the classical pagan gods, generally associated with aspects of Nature.

In the seventh stanza, Milton sketches a portrait of the pre-Christian poets' ignorance of Christ, enacting a dual meaning with the words "Sun" and "son":

> The Sun himself withheld his wonted speed,
> And hid his head for shame,
> As his inferior flame,
> The new-enlightened world no more should need;
> He saw a greater sun appear
> Than his bright throne, or burning axletree could bear. (79-84)

Characterizing Christ specifically as the "greater sun," which sounds of course like the "son" of which Virgil sang in general, Milton fuses the concepts of Christ and Nature, clearly delineating the superiority of the former to the latter: the sun that gives light to the world "hid his head for shame" when Christ was born, because his "inferior flame" would no more be necessary. Likewise, Milton's own Christian poetry would carry the same superior force in relation to pre-Christian verse. Creeping slowly backwards in time, the next stanza addresses the discussion that poets were having during the time just prior to the "greater sun's" arrival:

The shepherds on the lawn,
Or ere the point of dawn,
Sat simply chatting in a rustic row;
Full little thought they then,
That the mighty Pan
Was kindly come to live with them below;
Perhaps their loves, or else their sheep,
Was all that did their silly thoughts so busy keep. (85-92)

Following a paragraph that enacts a metaphorical identification between the "Son of God" that brings figurative "light" to our "dark" (meaning sinful) world, and the physical sun that brings literal light to our world—that by which we see—the shepherds' conversation "ere the point of dawn" would concern what poets thought and discussed before the birth of Christ, when they could have had no idea that God would come down to earth and take on human form; therefore they occupied themselves with other, more earthly things, like their "loves, or else their sheep" (91). Here we see young Milton beginning to deal with what would be at least a small difficulty for him throughout his career: how to square with his being so heavily influenced by the pre-Christian, pagan poetic tradition.[20] In the words of Stephen Fallon, Milton's poem indicates the "struggle between Milton's love of classical literature and the need to subordinate that literature to Christian truth" (246). To achieve this, Milton emphasizes the superior power of holy song, which can bend the laws of time, oust lesser gods, and ultimately deliver the inhabitants of a fallen world to paradise.

[20] See the month of May in Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar.* For a recent and illuminating discussion of this effort in Milton's early poetry, see Anthony Welch, "Milton's Forsaken Proserpine" in *English Literary Renaissance* 39 (2009): 529.

These claims, of course, come off as quite outlandish, particularly to Milton's readers today. But in approaching Milton some four hundred years after he lived and worked, it is vital that we approach it with sensitivity to his mystical worldview. C.W.R.D. Moseley puts it well and with admirable fairness that we would think Milton entirely out of his mind:

> were one not certain that Milton thoroughly, and with odd humbleness, believed his own poetic calling to be holy, one by which God spoke through him, the identification of himself and his poetry with such a pattern would announce a pride bordering on dementia. For there is not a whisper of ambiguity: the verse plainly claims that the hymn is holy, inspired, an act of worship. (103)

Milton's expression of his belief in the power of holy song was an "act of worship," which for him was a deeply religious and, therefore, grave matter. As Barbara Lewalski notes, "Milton is serious about reporting his high poetic aspirations and his ode *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity* as the first major realization of them" (38). Like the role of the poet himself, the power of song was not to be taken lightly.

In Spenser's *The Shepheardes Calendar*, the mysterious editor E.K. elaborates the great powers of poetry to move an audience:

> What the secrete working of Musick is in the myndes of men, aswell appeareth, hereby, that some of the auncient Philosophers, and those the most wise, as Plato and Pythagoras held for opinion, that the mynd was made was a certaine harmonie and musicall nombers, for the great compassion and likeness of affection in thone and in the other as also by that memorable history of Alexander: to whom when as Timetheus the great Musitian playd the Phrygian melodie, it is said, that he was distraught with such unwonted fury, that straight way rising from the table in great rage, he caused himself to be armed, as ready to goe to warre (for that musick is very war like:) And immediately whenas the Musitian

> chaunged his stroke into the Lydian and Ionique harmony, he was so furr from warring, that he sat as styl, as if he had bene in matters of counsell. Such might is in musick. (173)

The output of a poet will inevitably bear on the lives of the people who listen, and for Milton this signaled a religious and moral imperative that we do not find in Shakespeare. Milton may or may not have come across to revelers like Sir Toby Belch as a sour-faced Puritan like Malvolio, but he was excited about the ways poetry affected the real world and took it very seriously. Therefore in the Nativity Ode, his birth poem announcing his arrival on the scene as a serious poet on the rise, young Milton brings up the question of the poet's role in society, and answers by constructing alignments with Virgil and Spenser, defining himself against his greatest English predecessor, William Shakespeare. If, as Stephen Fallon points out in his reading of *Elegy 6*, the "distance between the Diodati figure and the Milton figure . . . measures the space between the sacred and the secular" (54), then we can measure the same distance between the Feste figure and the Malvolio figure (however unfairly), or indeed, the Shakespeare figure and the Milton figure.[21] And, of course, it goes without saying that no one would ever prefer Malvolio to Feste. In his ode *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*, Milton intended to restore far more than the authority of the mid-winter holiday, or his Christian religion; in his birth poem, which would be placed first in his first published book of poetry—*Poems, 1645*—Milton

[21] On the relation in Elegy 6 between the way a poet should live and the nature of his poetry, see Stella Revard, *Milton and the Tangles of Neaera's Hair*: *The Making of the 1645 Poems*. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1997. pp. 121-23.

sought to restore the authority of the social role of the poet and, in so doing, to establish that high authority for himself.[22]

[22] While Stella P. Revard has suggested Milton exercised some control over the "design" of his *Poems* (1645), Stephen B. Dobranski reminds us that such authorial control over the order of the poems would have been quite unusual, and probably misrepresents the conventions of the seventeenth-century book trade. More likely, the decision to place the Nativity Ode first was made by Humphrey Moseley. For Revard's perspective, see "The Design of the 1645 *Poems*" in *Young Milton: The Emerging Author*, *1620-1642*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013.

Chapter 2: 'Fantastic' Shakespeare: A Reading of Young Milton's Tempter

> If unchastity in a woman whom Saint Paul termes the glory of man, be such a scandaland dishonour, then certainly in a man who is both the image and glory of God, it must, though commonly not so thought, be much more deflouring and dishonourable. (*CPW* 1:892)

> MOTH: You are a gentleman and a gamester, sir.
> ARMADO: I confess both. They are the varnish of a complete man.
> (*LLL* 1.2.42-44)[1]

In his debut verses, Milton referred to the subject of his poem as "my Shakespeare" (1). While this has long been understood as a term of endearment, a reader with an ear well-attuned to Shakespeare's brand of ironic wordplay may also hear an equivocation, one that comes off downright condescending: Shakespeare is mine. One poet claims ownership of the other. Reading it this way we are then bound to ask: who was Milton's Shakespeare? To what version, what understanding of the dead poet did the living one lay claim? In *L'Allegro*, Milton named Shakespeare "Fancy's child," echoing a phrase from *Love's Labour's Lost*, wherein the King of Navarre refers to the comical Spanish "braggart," Don Adriano de Armado, as a "child of fancy" (1.1.168). The *OED* tells us that in Milton's day the term "fantastic," in its nominal form, was used to indicate one given to the imagination, who has "fanciful ideas or indulges in wild notions," or one who dresses fashionably, "given to fine or showy dress; a fop." This is how the other

[1] By "gamester," Moth means someone who engages recreationally in many sexual relationships, such as when Bertram uses the term in *All's Well that Ends Well*, telling the King that his wife Diana is "impudent . . . And was a common gamester to the camp" (5.3.212).

characters view Armado, whom Navarre observes to be "a man in all the world's new fashion planted" (1.1.162). A prevalent Renaissance disdain toward men who dressed fashionably was rooted in the notion that their "outward flourishes hid an inward void. In the late seventeenth century, Samuel Butler wrote that a fantastic is "one who wears his Feather on the Inside of his head" (131). In other words, to call another man a "fantastic" was to say he is more concerned more with matters superficial than anything of real substance or weight.

As it applies to bodily adornment—we might imagine a fantastic as a dandy with a purple feather in his fedora—so does it apply to language: someone who cares more about style than content, appearance than substance. In two of his plays concerned with the ways this character type finds expression in writing style, Shakespeare gives us two fantastic examples, Don Adriano de Armado in *Love's Labour's Lost* and Lucio in *Measure for Measure*.[2] Their names illuminate their characters: the hilarious, Spanish braggart has a name that is overly elaborate and alliterative, Don Adriano de Armado, and the "fantastic gentleman" of *Measure for Measure* is named after light, which means that by which we see, but also has another meaning as a word associated with pleasure, vanity, lack of weight; we have to imagine Shakespeare had this meaning in mind as well. What these fantastics have most in common is a flair for style, reflected of course in their use of language, mostly with the intent of procuring sensual pleasures, like Lucio talking a woman into bed or, in Armado's case, just talking because he loves to hear himself talk. His reputation preceding him, Armado is renowned as "One who the music

[2] In *Measure for Measure*, Lucio is described in the dramatis personae as "a fantastique."

of his own vain tongue / Doth ravish like enchanting harmony" (*LLL* 1.1.164-65). Employing language primarily toward the end of procuring pleasures, these fantastics tend to do so without much regard for objective truth; rather, for them, words are not so much a way of conveying content as they are things in themselves, useful to the extent that they produce pleasure. Indeed, Milton's Puritan contemporary John Robinson claimed that "words are like cloathes, used first for necessitie, after for convenient ornament, and lastly for wantonness" (227). This is certainly the case with Armado and Lucio, two characters largely driven by the "fantastic" whims of their sexual desires.

In his biographical study of Sir John Mennes and James Smith, Timothy Raylor shines light in a seldom searched corner of early modern literary history chronicling a mid-seventeenth century literary club called "The Order of the Fancy." Gathered around the Blackfriar's Theatre, according to Raylor, this group drank excessively as "[t]hey spoke nonsense, engaged in verbal competitions or 'wit-combats,' and composed burlesque or drolling verses, often travestying the classical works they had read at school" (21). The word "fancy" is roughly synonymous with "imagination," and according to the *OED* particularly refers to the "faculty of forming mental representations of things not present to the senses." What would probably have arrested Milton's attention about these "fantastic" versifiers, though, was that they were politically loyalist, often given to bashing anti-monarchial Puritans. Therefore, not only was the Order of the Fancy a group of poets whose works Milton would have disdained for literary reasons—writing nonsensical verses that imply a refusal to take poetry seriously—they were also his political enemies, though as Raylor notes the "group was not subversive in any self-

conscious or ideologically coherent fashion" (21). Quite the contrary, in terms of serious statements, these playful poets were saying nothing at all.

Naming Shakespeare "fancy's child," then, Milton associates him with these scurrilous versifiers, and subtly implies that Shakespeare's language is like the language employed by his fantastics: purely self-referential, which is to say having little to no bearing on "reality," and serving merely to "beguile" the time, to entertain an audience by way of wanton frivolity. When Theseus asks to hear a play, he's asking for some form of entertainment "To wear away this long age of three hours / Between our after supper and bedtime . . . to ease the anguish of a torturing hour" (*MND* 5.1.33-34, 37). For Milton, Shakespeare's verses were entertaining but, in a spiritual universe at war, ultimately meaningless and distracting.[3] Shakespeare was good for a chuckle, but intelligent minds should be concerned with matters of greater importance. As Richard Helgerson puts it, Shakespeare was a serious poet too, but "Shakespeare's seriousness is . . . not the seriousness of a man writing in conformity to the dictates of truth and duty, but rather a seriousness discovered in play" (39). Milton's was a seriousness of quite a different kind. In *At a Vacation Exercise*, an apostrophe to the English language—and one in which Milton himself indulges in his share of scurrilous versifying—the young poet contrasts the language of "fantastics" with that of "deepest spirits and choicest wits":

> But haste thee straight to do me once a pleasure,
> And from thy wardrobe bring thy chiefest treasure;
> Not those new-fangled toys, and trimming slight
> Which takes our late fantastics with delight,

[3] Indeed, this is how Milton's fallen angels use music and poetry in the hell of *Paradise Lost*, as a distraction from pain and sorrow.

But cull those richest robes, and gay'st attire
Which deepest spirits, and choicest wits desire. (17-22)

For Milton, to be a "fantastic" is to disregard Reason, to lose touch with reality, to indulge so fully in the pursuit of pleasures as to lack concern for matters of weight.[4] Though according to modern use it sounds ironic, Milton disapproved of Shakespeare for being a "fantastic" writer. This chapter will read the tempter in *Comus* as a response to the playwright—focusing particularly on two Shakespearean plays wherein "fantastic" characters display an ethic of male unchastity—and argue that Milton's Shakespeare was a literary Lucio, a very Don Adriano de Armado of the pen: entertaining, but bankrupt of spiritual value.[5] When he wrote his first and only stage play, Milton put Shakespeare to his own use by casting him in the role of the bad guy, the evil enchanter Comus, in a work that argues against licentiousness and advocates the spiritual power of chastity.

In *Comus*, the verbal echoes of Shakespeare are many, indicated most notably by scholars like John Guillory, A.W. Verity, and John Carey; in his edition of the shorter poems, Carey cited 32 "undisputable" echoes of Shakespeare.[6] Meanwhile, historically-based readings of *Comus* most often point to the sexual scandal pertaining to the

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[4] Milton didn't think Shakespeare was stupid; indeed, he recognizes his talent in "On Shakespeare." While usually a fantastic's lack of concern for grave matters could follow from his lack of intelligence, this was clearly not true in Shakespeare's case. Milton's Shakespeare is undeniably present, like Milton's Satan, curiously self-aware during his own self-undoing.

[5] "Unvalu'd" is the clever equivocal term Milton employs in "On Shakespeare" to make this point. It sounds like it could mean "priceless," but it could also mean useless, as it does in *Hamlet* when Laertes advises Ophelia that because Hamlet is a prince he cannot "carve for himself as unvalued" people do. Later in his life, Milton will substantiate this claim to his disapproval of Shakespeare in *Eikonoklastes*, wherein the poet cites the playwright out of necessity—since Charles would not understand his reference if he cited a more "abstruse" author—and insults Charles, who has just quoted Shakespeare, for being unable to borrow from "fitt Authors" (*CPW* 3:361).

[6] For a more detailed rendition of these echoes, see the Introduction, pp. 12-25.

Bridgewater family: in 1631, the Second Earl of Castlehaven, brother-in-law of Bridgewater's wife, was tried and executed for sexual crimes.[7] Therefore, according to this vein of criticism, Milton's masque in praise of chastity sought to redeem the reputation of the Egerton family, separating them from associations with scandal. Whether Milton intended this or not, surely the audience members would have been aware of these circumstances that form part of the play's cultural backdrop. But even if he did intend for his play to clean up the name of his host, Milton always set his sights much higher than to convey—simple and straight forward—a message to his audience members who were present. Milton was always writing for posterity. When he was called upon to write a stage play, Ann Baynes Coiro has noted that Milton "wished to excel in the cultural form most prominent in his twenties," and that his "ambition was to rival Shakespeare's" (90) contribution to literary history. Thus I offer an historically-based reading more concerned with literary than social history: the masque was undeniably composed around the time of the Bridgewater scandal, but Milton also wrote it near the beginning of his own poetic career quite soon after Shakespeare's had ended.

Exploring the ways Milton drew from Shakespeare in writing his masque, critics have focused primarily on three works: *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*,

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[7] See: Barbara Breasted, "*Comus* and the Castlehaven Scandal." *Milton Studies* 3 (1971): 201-04; Rosemary K. Mundhenk, "Dark Scandal and the Sun-Clad Power of Chastity: The Historical Milieu of Milton's *Comus*," *Studies in English Literature* 15 (1975): 141-52; Leah Marcus, "The Milieu of Milton's *Comus*: Judicial Reform at Ludlow and the Problem of Sexual Assault," *Criticism* 25 (1983): 293-327. These suggest that Bridgewater explicitly asked Milton to write a masque that would absolve his family of the stigma associated with the sexual scandal that had just blackened the family name. Other critics, however, have not found this position to be at all persuasive. For an opposing view, see William Kerrigan's "The Politically Correct *Comus*: A Reply to John Leonard," in *Milton Quarterly*. 27.4 (1993): 149-55. For a psychoanalytic reading of *Comus,* see William Kerrigan's *The Sacred Complex: The Psychogenesis of* Paradise Lost." Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993. And for an updated psychoanalytic reading, see John Rumrich, *Milton Unbound*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996. pp. 70-78.

and *The Tempest*, mainly because of common magical elements and spiritual agents—in the words of John Guillory, "the relationship of desire to imagination, and metamorphosis and transfiguration, or the effectuality of art" (76).[8] For Guillory, "Shakespearean echoes are drawn into the penumbra of the tempter's magical power" in Milton's attempts to "dissociate himself from that figure" (19). In other words, Guillory explicitly associates "Milton's rejection of imagination," his rejection of "fancy," with a "turn away from Shakesepeare" (21). Like most scholars, he focuses on the likeness of *Comus* to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but scant attention has been afforded the potentially rich ways Milton drew from Shakespeare's other works, even though those works address questions of particular importance to Milton: for example, *Measure for Measure*, a play with a title derived from Christ's Sermon on the Mount in the New Testament, or *Love's Labours Lost*, a work that addresses questions about what makes poetry good or bad or whether it is possible to achieve greater wisdom by abstaining from sensual pleasures.[9] Alexis Brooks de Vita has charted some of the "tantalizing space" where Comus and *Measure for Measure*, the most biblical of Shakespeare's plays, "reflect upon each other, in terms of dualistic urges in twinned characters . . . somewhat like placing two mirrors before each other and trying to discern the limit of their mutually reflective possibilities," which "may well be inexhaustible" (25). Further exploring the possibilities of that

[8] See also: John M. Major, "*Comus* and *The Tempest"* in *Shakespeare Quarterly*. 10.2 (Spring, 1959): 177-183. See also: Stephen Orgel, "The Case for *Comus*" in *Representations*, 81.1 (Winter, 2003): 31-45.

[9] The title of *Measure for Measure* derives from the Sermon on the Mount in the book of Matthew, Chapter 7, wherein Jesus says "Judge not, that ye be not judged . . . for by what measure ye judge it shall be measured unto you again." Both *Measure for Measure* and *Love's Labour's Lost* deal, in part, with the question of sexual asceticism.

reflective field, this chapter will add to *Measure for Measure* another of Shakespeare's works that seemed to seize Milton's attention, *Love's Labour's Lost*.

In simple terms, both plays include the following character types and tell the same tale: on one hand are those we might call "ascetics," those who aspire to chastity, intending to redirect their libidinal energies toward learning, mental acumen, or religion, but ultimately fail. In *Measure* we have Angelo; believed by everyone to have tamed his fleshly desires, or to lack them all together, he surprisingly gives in to his lust when he gains civic power, abusing it in attempt to rape Isabella.[10] In *Love's Labours*, the quartet of Navarre, Berowne, Longaville, and Dumaine all take on the ascetic role,[11] and all either try, or pretend to try, to shun sensual pleasures in aims to achieve higher learning, only to succumb to those baser drives and make themselves hypocrites.[12] On the other hand, opposed to these ascetics are the "fantastics," most notably Lucio and Don Adriano de Armado, who approach pleasure in quite the opposite way, according to an ethic of male unchastity, and these characters meet the worst fate of all: cuckoldry. Armado looks unknowingly forward to years of hard labor in support of his unchaste wife Jacquenetta, whose baby appears to have been sired by Costard.[13] For Lucio, unlike Armado, the

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[10] It is interesting to note that he desires her *because* she is chaste, and that the same in true in the case of Milton's Comus and The Lady. Alexis Brooks de Vita elaborates some of the parallels between the two strikingly similar works.

[11] However they do this with quite different attitudes; or at least, so they seem. Perhaps it would prove useful to put Longaville under the microscope, since he is the only one apart from Navarre who claims to like the idea, even preaching moderation in enjoying the fantastic company of Armado, whom they have also invited into their company just for that purpose.

[12] I am assuming my reader will take for granted that Milton would have identified with the ascetics, himself claiming to remain chaste, as a true poet must in order to write true poetry.

[13] Remarkably little has been said about Costard's apparent fatherhood of Jacquenetta's baby that he says "brags already" in her belly, implying of course that the father is Armado, in hopes of detracting attention and, consequently, responsibility for his own paternal agency.

concluding cuckoldry is quite expected, and like Angelo he pleads rather to be put to death or just beaten: "If you will hang me for it, you may; but I had rather it would please you I might be whipt" (*MM* 5.1.498-99). As Stephen Greenblatt observes, Armado and Lucio are "like Bertram in *All's Well that Ends Well* . . . treated with irony, distaste, and contempt" (123). While it might be objected that Shakespeare's condemnation of these fantastic characters works against the thesis of this study, I am by no means claiming that the view of Shakespeare as a fantastic is correct, only that Milton seems to have perceived him that way. Moreover, we have to assume Milton would not have considered Shakespeare (or anyone, I suspect) above the possibility of hypocrisy or self-contradiction. We need only read Sonnet 129 to see that Shakespeare was capable of entertaining notions that he would at the same time condemn. Moreover, he does not seem to have identified himself as any kind of fantastic; it was the chaste, ascetic Milton who cast him in that light.

The ascetics and the fantastics would have stood out to Renaissance audiences as diametrically opposed—Angelo, for instance, seems quite above giving in to fleshly temptations, as Lucio calls him a "man whose blood is very snow broth"—and Lucio is, conversely, an unapologetic frequenter of Mistress Overdone's brothel. But by the end of each play Shakespeare unifies these poles, breaks down the distinction between the two: ascetics and fantastics alike eventually succumb to their fleshly temptations and wind up standing on equally damnable ground to face judgment. Armado himself turns out to be a comical breaking down of this binary when the audience learns that he too had agreed to the King's scholarly asceticism, but he falls in love with Jacquenetta on his way to court.

Having agreed to spend three years without enjoying women, he cannot even make it there without falling in love with one on his way. At the end of *Measure*, Angelo and Lucio stand before the Duke to await punishment, the ascetic and the fantastic united in their mutual ruin.

In their shared failure, Shakespeare's fantastics and ascetics might be taken to suggest that ascetic ideals are simply unrealistic—in the words of William Kerrigan an "impossible physiology." If so, then they sing in harmony with Shakespeare's Sonnet 129, "the expense of spirit in a waste of shame," a wisdom-filled condemnation of lust that ends, ironically, in a tone of sad acceptance of an absurd human condition whereby men lack the power to withstand the temptation:

> All this the world well knows; yet none knows well
> To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell. (13-14)

Men walk knowingly into snares. It requires no stretch, then, to construe the voices of *Measure for Measure* and *Love's Labour's Lost* as echoing in unison: ascetic male chastity is impossible because it is futile to oppose natural human drives. Men are going to have sex anyway and, according to fantastics like Lucio and Armado, so they should. The fantastic characters in this pair of plays operate according to what we termed an "ethic of unchastity."

Berowne knows at the outset of *Labours* that their ambitions to scholarly asceticism will fail, protesting that "Necessity will make us all forsworn;" having just learned that the French King's daughter is on the way with her ladies, Berowne is ready to give up before they even begin (like Armado), arguing that it would be unnatural and

pointless to avoid them, as "every man with his affects is born" (*LLL* 1.1.147-49). Absolute resistance would be futile, reckons Berowne, because it is in their nature to mingle with the women; they are bound to it. For Kerrigan, similarly, in *Comus* even the Lady's "root-bound virtue" of chastity is "not free," but "in bondage to the desire denied" (55). It could be said, then, that here that we are conflating two ideas: the notion that men must have sex as it is natural and part of their affect, and that they should have sex, as it is activity properly becoming a man. I suggest that the play conflates these two ideas, which really cannot be separated. In other words, according to the "ethic of unchastity," men must and well should engage in sex as though it were a sport like hunting. Thus in his own words, Berowne voices the sexual ethic that permeates these two works: as Armado assures his page, having sex with women is the "varnish of a complete man" (*LLL* 1.2.42). Note his choice of the word "varnish," a transparent finish that creates a glossy shine, perfectly apt for a fantastic, one who places great value on outward luster. And according to Lucio's logic, Claudio is to die

> For that which, if myself might be his judge,
> He should receive his punishment in thanks. (*MM* 1.4.378-79)

By impregnating Juliet, Claudio has not done anything wrong; to the contrary, according to Lucio, he has done what he was supposed to. It is built into the fantastic's ethic: a gentleman has sex. In fact, rather than slandering, Lucio seems more intent upon defending the Duke's honor when he assures the Duke himself (in disguise): "Friar, thou knowest not the Duke so well as I do. He's a better woodman that thou tak'st him for" (4.3.151-52).

Unlike Angelo, who breaches his moral code when he attempts rape, the fantastics approach sensual pleasure with something like a sense of moral duty; for Lucio, Armado, and Comus, licentiousness is necessary to a proper gratitude toward nature. In fact, according to Comus, who voices this perspective in *Comus*, it would be more morally offensive not to indulge in nature's pleasures. Here the tempter sounds a lot like Shakespeare's Venus, as well as the speaker of the sonnets, when he urges the Lady:

> List, Lady, be not coy, and be not cozened
> With that same vaunted name Virginity:
> Beauty is Nature's coin, must not be hoarded,
> But must be current, and the good thereof
> Consists in mutual and partaken bliss
> Unsavory in th'enjoyment of itself. (737-42)

The value of Nature's gifts lies not in abstaining from but in the enjoyment thereof; this, of course, always overlaps with a reproductive duty, however one senses that Venus only cites this responsibility as a last resort after Adonis has already denied her plea to indulge for the purpose of pleasure alone:

> Torches are made to light, jewels to wear
> Dainties to taste, fresh beauty for the use,
> Herbs for their smell, and sappy plants to bear:
> Things growing to themselves are growth's abuse.
> Seeds spring from seeds, and beauty breedeth beauty;
> Thou was begot, to get it is thy duty. (163-68)

Having already been rejected by Adonis, here Venus resorts to citing an ethical imperative for him to appease her desires; it is his duty. As James Holly Hanford noted, it is also "no fanciful idea that Milton's *Comus* was written as a more or less official reply to the libertine philosophy of his fellow student, Thomas Randolph. In *The Muse's*

Looking Glass . . . it is reasoned that Nature's bounty is an invitation to enjoyment" (63), and that to abstain would be to offend her. Likewise, throughout the first 17 sonnets, Shakespeare's speaker reasons similarly as he urges the young man to reproduce. Lucio and Armado both live according to this ethic; while their reasons may differ, they believe a gentleman is entitled, indeed supposed to engage in the pleasures of procreation in order to repay nature and produce more beauty.

Milton disagreed. In this chapter, I suggest an idea that is neither new nor commonly voiced: in *Comus*, his first and only stage play, Milton responded to and rejected Shakespeare, "Fancy's child," by casting him as the villain, the evil enchanter Comus. In this I owe a substantial debt to the work of John Guillory, who came before me in claiming that Milton, who "tends to assign a unified significance to poetic careers . . . counteracts the overwhelming effect of Shakespearean language by placing him within orders of thinking and being (the fantastic and the natural) that stand in opposition to the more controlled exercise of human reason" (68). Milton claims to work in accordance with the higher faculty of Reason, intending to lead men to truth in a universe engaged in spiritual warfare. In Shakespeare, poetry most often springs from the fancy, and rather than fight in that spiritual war, rather distracts audiences from it, thereby, many Puritans believed, aiding and abetting the enemy. Guillory reads *Comus* as an allegorical dialog between the major poets of the Renaissance, wherein the silver-tongued enchanter represents Shakespeare.

Comus speaks and sings in rhymed verses that as Guillory, Verity, Carey and others have noted sound quite a lot like Shakespeare's, borrowing from the bard quite

often, and with the purpose of encouraging drunkenness and revelry; thus calls the tempter to his companions:

> Come, knit hands, and beat the ground
> In a light, fantastic round. (143-44)[14]

As noted in the Introduction, these lines borrow heavily from Ariel's song, "Full Fathom Five," toward the end of *The Tempest,* one of Shakespeare's works that was most influential on Milton. But beyond these echoes, the "light" revelry, (which is to say fun but also meaningless)[15] is essentially a big dance, everyone frolicking to music, and here Milton seems to associate such a party with fanciful ways of an Armado or a Lucio. Thus, Comus, the tempter in Milton's early stage play, fits Shakespeare's "fantastic" character type, which provides insight into how Shakespeare seems to have come across to Milton. Such a reading will offer better understanding of the very different ways in which Milton conceived of his own writing in comparison to Shakespeare's, the proper role of the poet in society (or what Milton conceived as the "true poet"), as well as the function of language itself. For Milton, language is not a means only to entertainment, simply to pass the time by giving pleasure, however strictly self-referential and thus disconnected from "reality," but a tool that leads men toward truth by way of signs that point to actual entities in the external world—a world that exists apart from the world of language. Like Shakespeare's fantastic characters, Comus is adroit with seductive rhetoric, for purposes

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[14] Generous to Milton, Verity claimed in his edition of *Comus* Milton "entered on the heritage that Shakespeare bequeathed and carried blank verse to its highest pitch perfection as a narrative form." See: A. Wilson Verity, Arcades *and* Comus.

[15] Cf. *Antony and Cleopatra* "licentious," and *Measure for Measure* "insubstantial."

of wantonness, and borrowing often from Shakespeare, uses language only to ends Milton was likely to see as corrupt, theatrical pleasures.

For Milton, far more seriously, language provides the weaponry for spirits engaged in cosmic warfare; this is just what the tempter, "the spokesman for sexuality in the masque," as Kerrigan puts it, "wanted us to forget; his sorcery induced his followers to wallow in sensuality, ignorant of their souls . . . the sexual act is the epitome of this forgetfulness" (52, 60). This idea that Christianity is about spiritual warfare is not uniquely Milton's of course but one grounded in New Testament theology. In Matthew 10, Jesus tells his disciples that he came into the world "not to send peace, but a sword" (10:33-34).[16] For Christians like Milton, when and how people use words is a far greater matter than it is for Lucio or Holofernes, because Christians see themselves as engaged in a cosmic battle the consequences of which reach far beyond an earthly grave. In a way, this might seem unfair to Lucio, who well knows the virtue of seducing can be life-saving; however when Lucio gets serious about language, his concern is for Claudio's earthly, time-bound life.[17]

Milton's concern is for eternal life, within the context of a cosmic situation that has much farther-reaching consequences; for Milton, Shakespeare's language is like that of his tempter, Comus: highly seductive, but empty and misleading. Milton would have considered this an abuse of language or, at least, a baser use, and his masque reviles

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[16] This notion is especially prevalent in Milton's latest poetry; *Paradise Regained*, for example, tells the story of a human Christ fighting his "great duel, not of arms / But to vanquish by wisdom" (1.174-75).

[17] It may also be worth noting that when Lucio gets serious about language, Isabella doesn't take him seriously at first; he had already gained a reputation as one whose "familiar sin" is to "seem the lapwing and to jest / Tongue far from heart" (*MM* 1.4.31-33).

Shakespeare through the Lady's scorching condemnation of the tempter as she refuses to drink from his cup:

> Were it a draft for Juno when she banquets,
> I would not taste thy treasonous offer; none
> But such as are good men can give good things,
> And that which is not good, is not delicious
> To a well-governed and wise appetite. (701-05)

When the Lady refutes his argument by attacking the evil tempter's ethos she drives to the heart of Milton's rejection of Shakespeare: in the early-modern era, a non-Christian poet can only produce frivolous poetry.[18] The young poet's "well-governed and wise appetite" was too concerned with serious matters to approve of a character like Falstaff or Touchstone, Pompey or Costard. In his later days, Milton would hint at Shakespeare in the preface to *Samson Agonistes*, clarifying that his would be a "tragedy coming forth after the ancient manner, much different from what among us passes for the best," and in part because he would avoid "the poet's error of intermixing comic stuff with tragic sadness and gravity; or introducing trivial and vulgar persons, which by all judicious hath been counted absurd; and brought in without discretion, corruptly to gratify the people" (708). Hardly any playwright mixed the comic and tragic as well as Shakespeare, making well-timed use of laughter to release tragic tensions, a pressure valve of sorts, and depicted the fascinating proximity of these two modes of the human experience, so intricately intertwined. Whether corruptly or not, no Elizabethan dramatist made use of

[18] I specify an "early-modern" poet because Milton did, in fact, honor the poetry of his ancient precursors, such as Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Homer, Virgil. But as scholars have noted, Milton seemed to foster deep misgivings about his attribution of such poetic authority to pagan writers.

fools and clowns in their tragedies, cutting the tension with laughter during heavily tragic moments, more than Shakespeare.

Comus' verse poetry is certainly corruptly gratifying, as he tries to persuade the Lady to drink from his cup with the masque's most enchanting lines; as Christopher Hill points out, "Comus is . . . like Satan in the earlier books of *Paradise Lost*: his character is so well drawn that he steals the show from the Lady," adding that "[w]hoever played Comus was almost certainly the best actor in the masque" (46). Stephen Orgel agrees that "for the audience Comus is the most attractive figure in the play" (35). Neil Forsyth calls the language of the enchanter "easily the most seductive in English poetry since Shakespeare," adding that he finds it "hard not to be swayed by the language, which is clearly influenced by the rhythm and sparkle of a Shakespearean speech" (41). As he will do later with Satan in *Paradise Lost*, here the young Milton pulls a Shakespearean move by giving some of the best lines to the villain. Announcing that he has her under his spell, Comus assures the lady "if I but wave this wand, / Your nerves are all chained up in alabaster" (658-59), echoing Prospero's line to the same effect, informing Ferdinand that because of Prospero's charming wand: "Thy nerves are in their infancy again, / And have no vigour in them" (*Tem.* 1.2.484-85). It seems pretty clear that Milton was thinking of Prospero and the petrifying power of his "art," perhaps even reading in to the character, as so many others have, an identification with the playwright himself, his "rough magic" a metaphor for his literary, dramaturgical art, the creation of entertaining illusions and its perils. Milton's tempter, too, creates fascinating illusions, in hopes of winning the whole

cooperation of the "Root-bound" lady, currently like a "statue," as was Daphne "that fled Apollo":

> Why are you vexed Lady? Why do you frown?
> Here dwell no frowns, nor anger, from these gates
> Sorrow flies far: see, here be all the pleasures
> That fancy can beget on youthful thoughts
> When the fresh blood grows lively, and returns
> Brisk as the April buds in primrose season.
> And first behold this cordial julep here
> That flames and dances in his crystal bounds
> With spirits of balm and fragrant syrups mixed. (666-74)

The enchanter's wonderfully entertaining language, and more obviously his emphasis on "all the pleasures / That fancy can beget on youthful thoughts," in the highly seductive blank verse Shakespeare used so well, easily accords with the "fantastic" character model. Perversely, like Shakespeare's fools, these characters consistently speak the most beautiful and wisdom-filled verses. The same is true for Lucio in *Measure*, most notably when he advises Isabella that

> Our doubts are traitors
> And makes us lose the good we oft might win,
> By fearing to attempt. (1.5.77-79)

This is a quotation we see today printed on coffee mugs. In other words, sometimes the "light" of wisdom that people seek in the great Shakespeare comes from what we might consider a more likely place, Hamlet or King Henry, Friar Lawrence or perhaps the philosophical Jacques, but other times it comes from more unassuming places, like someone deemed in the stage direction to be a "fool," or Lucio, "a fantastic gentleman."

And observe Lucio's beautiful, blank verse explanation of Claudio's situation to Isabella, linking Juliet's pregnancy to the natural process of husbandry:

> Your brother and his lover have embrac'd:
> As those that feed, grow full: as blossoming Time
> That from the seedness, the bare fallow brings
> To teeming foison; even so her plenteous womb
> Expresseth his full Tilth, and husbandry. (1.5.40-44)

Questionable as he is, Lucio has his moments; here his impressive poetics, in unrhymed iambic pentameter, add a new depth to his character. Most of what he says is, in fact, pretty eloquently put, and the other characters in the play find his company the more pleasing for it. At the outset of their dramatically ironic conversation in Act 3, scene 1, the Duke observes his style of speech with approval: "You are pleasant sir, and speake apace" (*MM* 3.1.445). The same is true of Armado in *Labours*, wherein the other characters delight in hearing him speak. Upon his agreement to devote three years to the king's program of studious asceticism, Berowne asks if there will be no recreation. Navarre assures him

> Aye, that there is. Our court, you know, is haunted
> With a refined traveller of Spain,
> A man in all the world's new fashion planted,
> That hath a mint of phrases in his brain,
> One who the music of his own vain tongue
> Doth ravish like enchanting harmony. (*LLL* 1.1.160-65)

Knowing that nothing that comes from Armado's "vain tongue" can be taken seriously, the King still loves to hear him speak because it's entertaining: "I protest I love to hear him lie" (1.1.173). Even the ever-critical Holofernes is delighted to hear him speak, and

shortly after meeting Armado approves of, and even repeats, one of his ridiculous phrases:

> ARMADO: Sir, it is the King's most sweet pleasure and affection to congratulate the Princess at her pavilion in the posteriors of this day, which the rude multitude call the afternoon.
> HOLOFERNES: The posterior of the day, most generous sir, is liable, congruent and measurable for the afternoon. The word is well culled, choice, sweet and apt, I do assure you, sir, I do assure. (5.1.80-87)

Holofernes' positive appraisal of Armado's style speaks not of what the fantastic says, but how he phrases it. In other words, the Spaniard's ridiculous substitution of the "posterior of the day" for the "afternoon" sets well with the old pedant for whom language is primarily a mode of pleasure, albeit a different type than that sought by Armado or Lucio.

As Ralph Berry points out, the vanity of the fantastics' language follows from its pure self-referentiality: "They [he includes Holofernes and Sir Nathaniel] are concerned with words as things in themselves" and for Armado "it is part of his incessant role-playing" (74). Thus their language is not for "real" but for play; the fantastics have no interest in truth, but rather merely an "infatuation with words" (74). To the ascetic characters, like Isabella, such frivolous linguistic play has the unfortunate effect of rendering earnest language ineffectual.[19] When things get serious and Lucio goes to inform Isabella that her brother is in grave danger for impregnating Juliet, Isabella assumes Lucio speaks in jest at her expense: "You do blaspheme the good in mocking

[19] I believe Milton would have identified more closely with Isabella than with any of the other characters in the play. For illuminating commentary on this idea, see Alexis Brooks de Vita, (2000).

me" (*MM* 1.4.38). But Lucio, skilled rhetor that he is, knows that concession is at the heart of persuasion, and earns her credulity by admitting his linguistic modus operandi:

> Tis true; I would not, though 'tis my familiar sin,
> With maids to seeme the Lapwing, and to jest
> Tongue, far from heart: play with all Virgins so. (1.4.31-33)

Isabella does eventually come around and believe in Lucio's dire message, but her initial reluctance to credit his speech confirms his reputation for using language that is ultimately meaningless apart from the pleasure it produces; but his confrontation with Isabella makes clear that the Lucio's "fantastic" linguistic habits might bring him personal enjoyment when what he is saying does not really matter, but at a cost: they threaten the ability of ordinary language to do the work he needs it to when what his message is dire.

Milton believed that his personal calling in involved writing "sacred" poetry—he believed his message was dire—and that answering the call to such a vocation required the poet to live an ascetic life. In the preface to Book II of *Reason of Church Government*, the first antiprelatical tract to which he affixed his name, Milton claims to be one of God's "selected heralds," like Moses or Isaiah, cosmically invested with extraordinary responsibilities. In other words, it was the moment when Milton came out and claimed, in prose, (he had been saying it in poetry for years), that he was England's *vates* poet, intending to pay his debt to his English countrymen by producing a sacred work that will hold eternal value; in his famous discussion of literary forms from the

Preface to Book 2 of his *Reason of Church Government*, Milton obliquely refers to Shakespeare when he writes:

> Neither do I think it shame to convenant with any knowing reader, that for some few years I may go on trust with him toward the payment of what I am now indebted, as being a work not to be raised from the heat of youth or the vapors of wine, like that which flows at waste from the pen of some vulgar amorist or the trencher fury of a rhyming parasite, not to be obtained by the invocation of Dame Memory and her siren daughters, but by devout prayer to that eternal Spirit who can enrich with all utterance and knowledge, and sends out his seraphim with the hallowed fire of his altar to touch and purify the lips of whom he pleases. (*CPW* 1:820-21)

Milton's reference to work that "flows at waste from the pen of some vulgar amorist" sounds like Shakespeare's "expense of spirit in a waste of shame," a sonnet that ends in a somber tone of failure and absurdity. And in this oblique response to the sonnet, Milton's tone is menacing; he means to separate himself from Shakespeare, so well, in fact, that he won't even mention the bard by name. But in "On Shakespeare," when Milton calls his subject "son of Memory," it well accords here with Milton's suggestion that the bard's verses came "by the invocation of Dame Memory and her siren daughters," as opposed to Milton's Christian approach. Mnemosyne, the Titan goddess of memory, was also known as the inventor of words, and goddess of rote memorization, particularly the sort required before writing and with the purpose of preserving cultural legends and myths. Therefore, Milton's implied claim here seems to be that while he is receiving his verses from a heavenly muse, Shakespeare, the "son of Memory," is only recalling things he has heard before, not bringing anything new into the world but recycling what was there of old. In

the eyes of a *vates* poet, Shakespeare's verses were of no eternal importance whatsoever; his stories were already here in other forms, and he is only retelling them.

This rejection is quite complicated, however, not only by the power that Shakespeare's works had over Milton's youthful poetic fancy, but perhaps even more by the growing acclaim of Shakespeare's poetic legacy in Milton's England. It did not matter to anyone that Shakespeare was retelling storied of old while he was telling them so well, and such reworking of olden tales was customary at the time. Milton's originality was fairly unprecedented during the early modern era. In a letter composed as an elegy Milton received on his 21st birthday from his childhood best friend, Charles Diodati complained that Christmas feasting had rendered him unable to write decent poetry. In his reply Milton assured Diodati that he needn't worry, in fact, because feasting and wine can even help one write the type of "light elegy" in which his friend has expressed his concern, asking: "Why do you complain that poetry flees from wine and festival banquets? Song loves Bacchus, and Bacchus loves songs" (191). Such habits are perfectly compatible with writing elegiac poetry. It is only the *vates* poet who must spare himself such pleasures. Even when it seems clear that two friends are joking with one another, he could not pass up the opportunity to state his belief in the ascetic poet; it was apparently, for Milton, not a laughing matter

Chapter 3: "Our Corrupted Clergy": Poetic Aspirations in *Lycidas*

> Now I have brought a woork to end which neither Joves feerce wrath,
> Nor sword, nor fyre, nor freating age with all the force it hath
> Are able to abolish quyght . . .
> (If Poets as by prophesie about the truth may ame)
> My lyfe shall everlastingly bee lengthened still by fame.
> (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 15.984-95)

> And when we return to our fatherland Olympus, and the eternal intervals of unmoving time stand still, we will go with golden crowns through the temples of heaven, wedding sweet songs to the smooth-voiced lyre, with which the stars and the vaults of both poles will sound. (Milton, *Ad Patrem* 221)

To the single-sentence headnote preceding the 1638 version of *Lycidas*, in his 1645 *Poems* Milton added that his elegy "by occasion foretells the ruin of our corrupted clergy, then in their height."[1] Ostensibly when young Milton indicts these bad shepherds, calling them

> Blind mouths! that scarce themselves know how to hold
> A sheep-hook, or have learned aught else the least
> That to the faithful herdman's art belongs! (119-21)

he refers to the group of men whom we understand to have been his open enemies, the church prelates.[2] Indeed, this identification seems so obviously correct it has all but escaped criticism.

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[1] Milton, headnote to *Lycidas* in *Poems of Mr. John Milton, Both English and Latin, Composed at Several Times.* London: Humphrey Moseley, 1645.

[2] Voicing the traditional interpretation of these verses, in *John Milton: Englishman*, James Holly Hanford writes that in this passage Milton is "echoing the ecclesiastical denunciations of Dante and Spenser; but it is also an echo of the conviction of his college days that the office of a pulpit demanded a spiritual sincerity

In the standard scholarly biography of Milton, Barbara Lewalski explains how the speaker's "scornful paradox, 'Blind mouthes,' brilliantly exposes the ignorance, ambition, and greediness of those bad shepherds who seek only to feed their own bellies, leaving the hungry sheep 'swoln with wind'" (84), but she never stops to ask who the "bad shepherds" *are.* Readers generally take for granted that they represent prelates like Archbishop Laud, and I do not disagree; they certainly do symbolize a certain corrupt system of church leadership of which Milton wanted no part, and that particularly in the metaphor of the "grim woolf," usually construed as the Roman Catholic Church. However, this is not all Milton seems to be saying in these lines; I suggest a reading that would expand the significance of the "bad shepherds" to accommodate other simultaneous meaning, namely certain poets from whom Milton wishes to separate himself.

Milton would not produce his political writings opposing prelatical episcopacy until a bit later, writing with his "left hand"[3] for the first time in the 1640's, after he had already seen in print his own verses in grand style, lost his mother, left his father's house to tour Italy, and returned to a homeland gearing up for civil war.[4] During the 1630's, he was not yet as engaged with the debates concerning church government as he would soon become. This is not to say, however, that in *Lycidas* Milton was not also writing about

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and a quality of humane learning not to be observed in the majority of those who were preparing themselves for it" (49).

[3] In *The Reason of Church Government*, Milton wrote that in the medium of prose he was limited to the use "but of my left hand" (*CPW* 1:808).

[4] For a fine biography of Milton that reads him specifically as a radical Republican revolutionary, see Christopher Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution.* Hill tells us Milton did not exactly hurry home, as he had indicated he would in his letters, but took several months in making it back.

church government, for he certainly was. Gordon Campbell notes that while the debate about episcopacy "had rumbled on for decades . . . in 1637 [it] had erupted because of the indictment of three prominent Puritans, (Henry Burton, John Bastwick, and William Prynne) for publishing tracts which attacked episcopacy" (30). Several years before he would write "anti-prelatical" tracts of his own, still living at Horton with his father, feeling the pressure that accompanies such a belated professional start, in his late twenties Milton was mostly concerned with working out the terms of his poetic vocation.[5] In the pastoral mode, of course, what he means by the "herdsman's art" is poetry. Following James Holly Hanford's observation that "the fiction of a shepherd contest was the very essence of pastoral as a literary form" (31), this chapter expands the meaning of "blind shepherds" of Milton's "corrupted clergy," who in Milton's estimation do not know anything about the "herdsman's art," to read *Lycidas* as a poem about poetry and poets, which stages a singing competition in which Milton himself turns out to be the winner.[6]

Of course when he wrote the poem Milton was thinking about Edward King, whose recent death occasioned the work as a contribution to an anthology of elegies.[7]

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5 J. Martin Evans has noted that a "drastic change in the direction of his life" occurred when Milton "underwent what Daniel J. Levinson has called an Age Thirty Transition, a period of psychological crisis in which one's past is reappraised and one's future redefined" (7). Writes Levinson, "the provisional, exploratory quality of the twenties is ending and a man has a sense of greater urgency . . . He has the feeling: 'If I want to change my life—if there are things in it that I don't like, or things missing that I would like to have—this is the time to make a start, for soon it will be too late'" (86). J. Martin Evans, *The Road from Horton: Looking Backwards in "Lycidas."*

6 For a psychoanalytic perspective that relates the pastoral conventions of the poem as a "singing competition" to "the powerful energies of repression latent in the text," see William Collins Watterson, "'Once more, O ye Laurels': *Lycidas* and the Psychology of Pastoral." pp. 48-57.

7 Scholars do not seem to think Milton bore any significant relationship to King personally. They were acquaintances but nothing more. Woodhouse and Bush write that "Since Christ's College was small—it had about 260 members—Milton and King would have had some degree of acquaintance; there is no evidence of anything beyond that. Edward Phillips, in his life of his uncle (1694), singled out 'one Mr.

And as most readers recognize, Milton was also thinking about himself. E.M.W. Tillyard famously observed that readers of *Lycidas* must "distinguish between the nominal and the real subject, what the poem professes to be about and what it is about. It assumes that Edward King is the real, whereas he is but the nominal subject. Fundamentally *Lycidas* concerns Milton himself."[8] That Milton was writing about both Edward King and himself is easy to believe; but it seems unlikely he was thinking only of King and himself. Quite the contrary, in *Lycidas* Milton involves other poets as well, particularly Ben Jonson, Virgil, and Spenser, and we can trace these connections back to the distinction that makes the *vates* a special sort of poet, and which characterizes the young Milton's alignment with poets like Virgil and Spenser, turning away from Shakespeare.

A letter Milton wrote his childhood best friend Charles Diodati offers a glimpse into Milton's mind around the time he wrote *Lycidas*: "you ask what I am thinking of? So help me God, an immortality of fame" (*CPW* 1:327). During 1637 it would have made sense for the young Milton to dream of immortality, for in that year, death surrounded Milton. The same month Milton had heard about the death of Ben Jonson, England's Laurate poet, news of Edward King's death reached him as well; earlier during in the spring of that same year, death had claimed the young poet's mother, Sara Milton. Thus toward the late fall of 1637, in what F.T. Prince called "one of the chief glories of English

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King, with whom, for his great Learning and Parts, he had contracted a particular Friendship and Intimacy' (*Early Lives*, ed. Darbishire, 54); but Phillips, who was born in 1630, could have no personal knowledge, and his statement sounds like a mere inference from *Lycidas*" (544).

[8] E.M.W. Tillyard, "from *Milton*" in *Milton's* Lycidas: *The Tradition and the Poem, New and Revised Edition.* Ed. C.A. Patrides. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1983. 63. Richard P. Adams agreed, stating that "the drowning of Edward King was the occasion, rather than the subject" (111) of the poem. Richard P. Adams, "The Archetypal Pattern of Death and Rebirth in *Lycidas*" in *Milton's* Lycidas: *The Tradition and the Poem, New and Revised Edition.* Ed. C.A. Patrides. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1983.

lyrical verse" (153), Milton reflected his understandable preoccupation with death, particularly employing poetic language as a way to fortify oneself, or preserve oneself against it, by writing a poem that would secure his own immortality by declaring him the heaven-appointed prophetic poet/priest, or *vates* of the English people.

Concerning the common Early modern and classical discussion about the proper way for a poet to live, John Guillory points out that just as *Comus* stages a conversation among Renaissance poets, so too does *Lycidas* dramatize a discourse on poetry (68). In the pastoral mode, shepherd of course means poet; and the shepherd tending the flock is easily understood to symbolize the poet guiding his audience with verse.[9] Thus when St. Peter[10] refers to the bad shepherds, disdaining the "flashy songs" of they who "intrude, and climb into the fold" only to "scramble at the shearer's feast"—there may be some polysemy here, since it is not that Milton is *not* criticizing the priests—he also disdains poets, priests of another sort, specifically those who write primarily to get paid.[11] This is an important point for Milton, for the "true poet" was no mercenary, putting his pen to

[9] Most readings of *Lycidas* have focused on its "pastoral" mode and the tradition thereof. For criticism on the poem and its place in the pastoral tradition see Scott Elledge, *Milton's "Lycidas": Edited to Serve as an Introduction to Criticism.* See also: James Holly Hanford, "The Pastoral Elegy and Milton's *Lycidas"* in *Milton's* Lycidas: *The Tradition and the Poem, New and Revised Edition.*

[10] Recently there has been some disagreement concerning the identification of the "Galilean pilot" as St. Peter. For an argument that claims he is rather not St. Peter but Christ, see M.J. Edwards, "The Pilot and the Keys: Milton's *Lycidas* 167-171 in *Studies in Philology*, (2011).

[11] Giving background information about the office of poet laureate, Masson chronicles that "In the case of Ben . . . the office had been converted into something more definite and substantial than it had been before. Before his appointment, a pension of a hundred merks a-year had been conferred on him by James. This pension had come to be regarded as his official income in the laureateship, and, as such, had been raised to a hundred pounds by Charles in 1630" (432). Shakespeare, as well, was well known in Milton's England to have earned a handsome living, improving his personal economic status dramatically.

use in the accumulation of material wealth, but a humble servant.[12] In *Ad Patrem*, Milton defends his vocational calling to his earthly father as an office appointed by his heavenly father by flouting those versifiers who make it a priority to pursue material wealth: "Go now, gather wealth, fool, whoever you are, that prefer the ancient treasures of Austria, and of the Peruvian realms . . . more than learning" (223). Milton would not consider any poet whose foremost aim was to pack playhouses and make money a true poet; rather, these "Blind mouths!" are the shepherds to whom "The hungry sheep look up, and are not fed" (125). While it might be objected that Shakespeare could hardly be though of as such a shepherd, never taking it as his poetic job to look after his audience, this is, in fact, just the point that Milton was making: a poet who does not accept this responsibility should not be elevated to the level of the nation's greatest poet. Such an honor should be reserved for the *vates*. In *Lycidas*, Milton lays the groundwork for thinking of his own verses as the poetic nourishment England has been lacking. When Guillory makes his case for reading Comus as a discourse of the major voices of English Renaissance poets, he also notes that "Voices succeed or interrupt one another in a pattern for which "Lycidas" might be taken as the model: the reader does not quite know where to close the quotation marks," and that "the poem 'as a succession of voices' suggests an analogy to literary history" (68). However Guillory mentions this only in passing, and pays all his attention to *A Masque*, none to *Lycidas*. Following this reading of the poem as a conversation, then, we might imagine the wolves signify the church—an organization of

[12] It is interesting to note how the two poets and their respective systems of poetics represent products of their specific, socioeconomic backgrounds; Milton could afford to dream of writing poetry for free, just as Shakespeare's less affluent background might account for his focus on generating personal wealth.

men whom Milton liked to call "prelates," like Archbishop Laud[13]—and the bad shepherds signify the poets Milton associates closely with one another: Ben Jonson and William Shakespeare.[14]

David Masson chronicles that the "death of Ben Jonson had been the great event of the literary world in the autumn" in which Milton wrote *Lycida*s, "and it was not till more than half a year had elapsed that it ceased to be matter of town talk" (646). It was not just Milton; everyone was thinking of the late laureate poet. In the opening line of *Lycidas*, "Yet once more, O, ye laurel, yet once more" Milton echoes Jonson explicitly, calling him to the conversation.[15] In his final book of poetry *Epigrammes* (1612), Jonson's final poem "On the Famous Voyage" jokingly evokes a muse, "yet once more," also echoing a passage from the New Testament *Book of Hebrews*:

> Alcides, be thou succoring to my song!
> Thou hast seen hell, some say, and know'st all nooks there
> Canst tell me best how every fury looks there,
> And art a god, if fame thee not abuses,

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[13] Appointed Archbishop of Canterbury in 1633, William Laud saw to it that opponents of Episcopacy—like Milton—were treated as enemies of the state, forcing many to leave England. After the revolution he was himself charged with treason and executed in 1645. See William Laud, *The History of the Trouble and Tryal of the Most Reverend Father in God and Blessed Martyr, William Laud*, London: 1695. See also: *The Works of the Most Reverend Father in God*, *William Laud, Sometime Lord Archbishop of Canterbury* (430-33).

[14] Milton groups Jonson and Shakespeare together in *L'Allegro.* For Milton, poetic style is closely associated with lifestyle. It was well known during Milton's time that Jonson and Shakespeare had been drinking buddies at the Mermaid Tavern just around the corner from the house on Bread Street where Milton grew up. Let us take a moment to enjoy David Masson's delightfully imaginative passage: "Any time, therefore, between 1608 and 1614, while Milton was a child, we may fancy those meetings going on close to his father's house, at which, over a board covered with cups of Canary, and in a room well filled with tobacco-smoke, the seated gods exchanged their flashes . . . Ah! what an evening in the Mermaid was that; and how Ben and Shakespeare betongued each other, while the others listened and wondered; and how, when the company dispersed, the sleeping street heard their departing footsteps, and the stars shone down on the old roofs" (46).

[15] For other accounts of Milton's invocation of Ben Jonson through the phrase "yet once more," see works by Matthew Prineas, Edward W. Tayler, and John Henry Raleigh.

> Always at hand to aid the merry muses.
> Great Club-fist, though thy back and bones be sore
> Still, with thy former labours, *yet once more*
> Act a brave work, call it thy last adventury;
> But hold my torch while I describe the entry
> To this dire passage. (50-57, italics mine)

Jonson spoofs the very idea of spiritual invocation, that a poet can pray to heaven and receive inspiration from a muse allowing him to see beyond the confines of this world; or as Milton puts it in *At a Vacation Exercise*, a muse could enable a poet to "sing of secret things" (45), his "transported mind" to "soar / Above the wheeling poles, and at Heav'n's door / Look in, and see each blissful deity" (33-35). Not only does Jonson's mocking poem sing in a silly tone—undeniably poking fun at things Milton takes quite seriously—it is also full of putrid images. Bruce Boehrer points out that "many (perhaps most) readers" have found *On the Famous Voyage* "simply disgusting. The tale of two Londoners who hire an open boat to row them up the sewage-clogged Fleet Ditch for a visit to a Holborn whorehouse" (9). Herford, Simpson, and Simpson call it a "hideous and unsavory burlesque" (339), and Algernon Charles Swinburne calls it the "plunge of a Parisian diver into a cesspool" (95). There can be little room to wonder what Milton would have thought about England's laureate poet evoking (or pretending to evoke) a muse to write a poem literally about excreta.

Milton's insistence on the contrast between a higher and lower style fit for higher and lower subjects surfaces repeatedly in his writings, both in his youth and throughout his career. For Milton, content and style must be suited one to another, and moreover

suited to the personal lifestyle of the poet himself. Some types of poems required muses and others required none; some were better written in a lower, lighter style, on a belly full of food and even wine, while others required a grand style, made possible by habits like a spare diet, strict sobriety, chastity, and in some cases even fasting. After Milton's childhood friend Charles Diodati pled in a letter for his own verses to be excused if they were found lacking in quality because he had spent the holiday season eating and drinking to excess, in *Elegy 6* Milton half-jokingly replied that poetry is perfectly compatible with "wine and feasting . . . for such poets" as they who write "light Elegy." But, continues Milton,

> he who tells of wars, and of heaven under the rule of Jove in his maturity, and reverent heroes and semi-divine leaders, and sings now of the sacred deliberations of the supreme gods, now of the deep realm where the fierce dog barks—let him live sparingly, like the master of Samos, and let plants provide him with harmless food; let the clearest water stand nearby in a beechwood vessel, and let him drink sober drafts from a pure spring. Add to this a youth free of crime and chaste, and strict morals, and a hand free from stain. (192-93)

The "master of Samos" to whom he refers is Pythagoras, who stressed in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* that a poet must exercise temperance with regard to food and drink, shunning the violent practice of sustaining on the flesh of other sentient beings, but rather let him drink water from a "pure spring," and let him live on the "harmless food" of "plants." Milton's bid to his particularly chosen poetic vocation as England's *vates* depends on this hard distinction between light and heavy styles for light and heavy poetic tasks, and he makes the point every chance he gets. Even in a personal address to his best

friend Milton cannot pass up the opportunity to characterize himself as a higher type of poet, priestly and prophetic. As Cedric Brown points out, Milton's serious yet "playful spirit" is evinced in the "contrast between Diodati's distended stomach and Milton's 'not full,' non pleno ventre (1). A Roman richness in feasting is set against a water-drinking Pythagorean asceticism for the aspiring poet" (114). Milton will continue to draw this distinction repeatedly throughout his career, but never more insistently than in his youthful verses. A decade prior when he was still a student at Christ's College, Milton gave two "raucous" Latin speeches that were "peppered with boisterous jokes about gender, sex, farts, and the like" (11), then dismissed such "new-fangled toys and trimming slight" as the style of "late fantastics" than whom he would rather soar much higher:

> Yet I had rather, if I were to choose,
> Thy service in some greater subject use,
> Such as may make thee search thy coffers round,
> Before thou clothe my fancy in fit sound:
> Such where the deep transported mind may soar
> Above the wheeling poles, and at Heav'n's door
> Look in, and see each blissful deity. (29-35)

Even when the occasion calls for silliness, which he had no problem delivering, the young Milton positioned that levity as a backdrop against which he would define his own poetic gravity. During this period in his life, Milton seized every opportunity to state the claim which he repeated throughout his youth, again and again: he genuinely aspired to become a higher, mystical type of poet, one the likes of which England has never seen

before, and this is a claim which can be found in all of his major poems before the 1640's and is the very point of *Lycidas*.

In the opening verses, as Milton echoes Ben Jonson he also echoes the thunderous voice of God from the biblical books of *Hebrews* and *Haggai*; from Milton's perspective, such a juxtaposition—Ben Jonson's mortal voice alongside God's—would undoubtedly render the voice of the mortal quite weak. In other words, Milton activates the mouths of Ben Jonson and God at the same time in order to appreciate the latter's thunder; he repeats a phrase from the New Testament *Book of Hebrews*, which itself repeats God's phrasing from the Old Testament *Book of Haggai*, when God spoke:

> Whose voice then shook the earth: but now he hath promised,
> saying, *Yet once more* I shake not the earth only, but also heaven.
> And this word, *Yet once more*, signifieth the removing of those
> things that are shaken, as of things which are made, that those
> things which cannot be shaken may remain. (*Heb.* 12:26-27, italics mine)

Contrasting the voice of God so distinctly with the voice of Ben Jonson, the young Milton begins the poem with a reminder to his reader not only of the reiterative nature of language, but also the difference in magnitude and power between things heavenly and things earthly. This parallels what he had done in *L'Allegro* and *Il Pensoroso*, companion poems which oppose one another as representations of "mirthful" or "joyful" man, and the "pensive" or "contemplative" man. At every turn Milton dramatized the distinction between things light and things with weight, between things temporal and things eternal.

The repetitive content of this opening line deserves attention for another reason: it articulates Milton's open apocalyptic vision, as opposed to the closed one he rejects: for

Milton, death is followed by eventual rebirth. Whereas in the poetry of Shakespeare, after death we become "food for worms," as Hotspur almost puts it, dying before he can complete the line that Hal has to finish. In Milton the same is true; but for Milton, after death human spirits will go into a sleep-like state, eventually awaken, and then go on existing forever, when "the eternal intervals of unmoving time stand still" (221). Milton was a "mortalist," which means he believed the soul dies with the body, however he did not think the individual soul headed for oblivion. Rather, for Milton, at the time of death the soul goes into a sleep like state, to be awakened later. Thus, the opening line of *Lycidas* speaks of eternity as it repeats the phrase: yet once more.[16] Milton begins his poem with a phrase about repetition, and then sings it again, reflecting not only his alignment with a protestant Christian God and opposition to Jonson, but his belief in eternal life; Milton's creation of a continually resounding echo emphasizes the post-mortem renewal that sets Milton's thinking and poetry apart from Jonson's and Shakespeare's. Here Milton announces his arrival, his presence on the scene, so to speak, among English poets, and makes a bid that he is the rightful heir of the nation's office of poet laureate, the *vates* poet of England. For Milton never aspired to be a great English poet; he aspired to be *the* great English poet. Under such circumstances it is easy to conceive Milton's alignment with Spenser and against Jonson and Shakespeare, specifically regarding their conceptions of how poetry achieved its end, immortality; in doing so for himself, Milton distinguished between two different types of poets. While

[16] Milton, *Lycidas*. For analysis of Milton's allusion here to Virgil's second *Eclogue*, which begins "You too, O laurels, I will pluck, and you their neighbor myrtle," see J. Martin Evans' *The Road from Horton: Looking Backwards in* Lycidas (19-23).

they all agreed on the purpose of poetry—to battle death—metaphysically they conceived of these purposes in markedly disparate ways: Spenser and Milton looked forward to spiritual afterlife, and sought to secure their immortality in an otherworldly, spiritual sense, while Shakespeare thought of post-mortem existence in a strictly earthbound sense; he would go on "living" in the minds of readers.

Aaron Kunin notes that both Milton and Shakespeare take part in the "preservation fantasy" that appears in Horace's third book of odes:

> I have finished a monument more lasting than bronze and loftier
> than the Pyramid's royal pile, one that no wasting rain, no furious
> north wind can destroy, or the countless chain of years and the ages'
> flight. I shall not altogether die, but a mighty part of me shall escape
> the death-goddess. On and on shall I grow ever fresh with the glory
> of aftertime. (ode 30 [1-8])

According to Kunin, in his preservation fantasy Horace creates a "quasi-human" space "between life and death, which ordinarily have no middle term" (93). Accepting the inevitability of bodily death and decay, Horace merely hopes to live on in part, thereby growing "ever fresh with the glory of aftertime" (8). Therefore the immorality promised by Horace's poetry is qualified: it is only partial immortality; a poet "lives on" through his verses, but only in a fragmentary way, and whatever does live on he is not around to experience, since circumstances have denied him the opportunity (so far as we know). Since literal immortality is out of the question, Horace's "space between life and death" Kunin calls "quasi-human, because death is an absolute limit to the human condition" (93) Milton and Shakespeare both employ poetry to test this limit, but with entirely

different goals and expectations. The following section will consider those expectations by close reading the language of their expression in Milton's *Lycidas* alongside the similar expressions in Shakespeare's sonnets.[17]

Discussing the employment of verse as a means for creating a bulwark against death, Lukas Erne points out the prevalence of this near ubiquitous theme in Shakespeare's sonnets: "No reader can ignore how prominently the theme of poetry as immortalization figures in them. In fact, no fewer than twenty-eight sonnets deal with this topic" (5). In Sonnet 55, Shakespeare's speaker follows Horace closely in voicing the fantasy of poetically preserving the Young Man's beauty beyond death:

> Not marble, nor the gilded monuments
> Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme;
> But you shall shine more bright in these contents
> Then unswept stone, besmeared with sluttish time.
> When wasteful war shall statues overturn
> And broils root out the work of masonry,
> Nor Mars his sword, nor war's quick fire shall burn
> The living record of your memory.
> 'Gainst death, and all oblivious enmity
> Shall you pace forth; your praise shall still find room
> Even in the eyes of all posterity
> That wear this world out to the ending doom.
> So, till the judgment that yourself arise,
> You live in this, and dwell in lovers' eyes.

Along with Shakespeare's "Young Man" sonnets, Milton's *Lycidas* has this in common: the conceit of poetry as a means for going beyond the boundaries of the human condition.

[17] Citations of Shakespeare's sonnets refer to Stephen Booth's edition. New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1977.

But when Shakespeare does so, he tends to do it ironically—Milton's efforts at immortality are sincere. Shakespeare's claims to immortality come across as ironic because he seems always to express the consciousness that they will fail; in other words, for the speaker of Shakespeare's sonnets immortality is impossible. Death and oblivion will eventually come wipe everything out whether we write poems or not. Stephen Booth observes of the second quatrain that "[e]ven as they assert the immortality of the poem these lines remind a reader of the flimsiness and vulnerability of anything written on paper" (229), and the third presents a "series of common figurative uses of the idea of being alive and of words than mean "living"; their quantity and variety make the absence of the simple, literal sense of "living" noticeable and thus accentuate the fact of mortality" (229). This sense of pursuing a lost cause is intensified when we consider that Shakespeare never actually names his subject or even describes the outstanding beauty to which his verses pay tribute. It is as if, as Tillyard suggests about Milton's elegy, the poet puts us in need of a distinction between the nominal and the real subject; the nominal subject of the first 125 sonnets is a Young Man, but the real subject is the one who will achieve immortality if anyone does and that is the poet himself. Don Paterson calls "Sonnet 55 . . . a poem about the poetry's power to keep something in mind over time, regardless of the something it makes immemorial" (163).[18] In the sonnets the effort to achieve immortality through poetry is set against the backdrop of a highly conscious awareness that such preservation is futile. We keep on battling death despite our

[18] I recommend this enjoyable book not only for Paterson's impressive insights, being himself a poet, but even more so for the candid and personable style in which he approaches these verses "written 400 years ago by a bald Englishman who didn't even consider poetry his main literary medium" (ix).

knowledge that he is inevitably going to win. In Horace, similarly, death is only surmountable because the speaker shall "not altogether die," but a " mighty part" will live on in the earthly "glory of aftertime." His verses ensure, at best, partial immortality. The same is true for Shakespeare, who articulates this conceit beautifully in the final couplet:

> So, till the judgment that yourself arise,
> You live in this, and dwell in lovers' eyes. (13-14)

It might be pointed out here that Shakespeare seems to hint as religiosity in his reference to the Last Judgment, but considering the poet "as near to a practicing atheist as it was possible to get at the time," Paterson explains the line by asserting that Shakespeare assumed, like most of his contemporaries, that human history was, and would continue to be, a narrative of decline" (164). Whether Shakespeare's Last Judgment would be a metaphysical event, as in Milton's cosmos, or simply the vanishing point at which a long, steady decline hits absolute zero, the speaker's main point here is that while the subject is dead but other people are still living, so too will the subject live on in these verses. This is a reiteration of the same point Shakespeare makes many times in the Young Man sequence, most famously in the final couplet of sonnet 18:

> So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
> So long lives this, and this gives life to thee. (13-14)

Oft repeated in the sonnets, as in Horace this notion implies that the subject will live on only in part—in this case the poet hopes to preserve the Young Man's beauty—and this can happen only in the "eyes of posterity" when later people read the poem. As for the

speaker himself, he imagines no spiritual afterlife; consider the first quatrain of Sonnet 71:

> No longer mourn for me when I am dead
> Than you shall hear the surly sullen bell
> Give warning to the world that I am fled
> From this vile world with vildest worms to dwell. (1-4)

Reading the poem too literally, Stephen Booth points out the contradiction in a poet addressing his subject thusly: when I am gone do not even remember me. For Booth, this turns the speaker in to a "comic caricature" or an example of "narcissistic smugness," but I believe in this strictly logical approach to the poem we miss what is more important: the feelings behind the lines of such desperation that would drive a grown man to say something like this to the object of his affection. And moreover, in terms of the "preservation fantasy" we are tracing throughout these authors, these verses are consistent with Shakespeare's other sonnets that suggest human death is followed only by oblivion. It is a realistic if somber outlook. Shakespeare's sonnets hope for no spiritual, otherworldly immortality, but share Hotspur's perspective in anticipation of becoming inanimate, organic matter.

It is safe to assume that Milton would have disapproved of Shakespeare's poetry for a variety of reasons, and here I wish to focus on the two that seem the most germane: Shakespeare's ironic disregard for Milton's (or any) God, and pursuant to that, his choice of poetic subject: namely, an attractive young man with whom the speaker is entirely

infatuated.[19] Regarding the former, Paterson keenly observes that the "strange, lapidary dedication" to the sonnets:

> TO.THE.ONLIE.BEGETTER.OF.
> THESE.INSVING.SONNETS.
> Mr.W.H.ALL.HAPPINESSE.
> AND.THAT.ETERNITIE.
> PROMISED.
> BY.
> OVR.EVER-LIVING.POET.
> WISHETH.
> THE.WELL-WISHING.
> ADVENTVRER.IN.
> SETTING.
> FORTH.
> T.T.[20]

"must surely" be an allusion to the following oft-quoted verse from the New Testament:

> For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. (*John* 3:16)

Paterson also observes that in all the Bibles Shakespeare had at hand, "son" would have been spelled 'Sonne.' So here we have Mr. WH as the only begetter, i.e. God of the 'Christ' of the sonne-ts; though he is also promised everlasting life (eternitie) by an

[19] For a reading of Shakespeare's sonnets as "the grand masterpiece of homoerotic poetry" (1), see Joseph Pequigney's *Such is My Love: A Study of Shakespeare's Sonnets.* Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996.

[20] Katherine Duncan Jones voices the majority opinion "at its simplest" when she attributes the dedication to Thomas Thorpe, but I cannot help being persuaded by Don Paterson who thinks the "first part of this dedication is mighty clever for 'TT'—Thomas Thorpe, the publisher," and that we are therefore "within our rights to see WS's hand here" (4).

immortal (ever-living)" (4). We cannot, of course, know whether Milton would have read these meanings into Shakespeare, but it is difficult to imagine them being lost on the young poet's remarkable sensibilities; he would surely have been aware of them and, against them it seems, composed his own notion of the true poet. Not only do Shakespeare's verses disregard the element of prayer, so essential to Milton's system of belief, and without evoking a muse or sanctifying God or any religion (except ironically), he even pokes fun at God; Shakespeare flirts with unveiling his divine indifference but never fully does. In Sonnet 121, for example, the speaker heralds thinkers like Machiavelli and Nietzsche turning notions of "good" and "evil" on their heads:

> 'Tis better to be vile than vile esteemed,
> When not to be, receives reproach of being,
> And the just pleasure lost, which is so deemed
> Not by our feeling, but by others' seeing.
> For why should others' false adulterate eyes
> Give salutation to my sportive blood?
> Or on my frailties why are frailer spies,
> Which in their wills count bad what I think good?
> No, I am that I am, and they that level
> At my abuses, reckon up their own;
> I may be straight, though they themselves be bevel,
> By their rank thoughts my deeds must not be shown,
> Unless this general evil they maintain:
> All men are bad, and in their badness reign.

The first quatrain hits the reader with the greatest shock, seeming to imply that evil undiscovered is no evil at all. Expressing a blatant disregard for traditional morality, this poem seems to challenge God quite directly with the speaker's refusal: "No, I am that I am" (9). Paterson notes that this line "is of course unbelievably blasphemous" (121), as

those are the words spoken to Moses by which God announced himself via the burning bush in the Old Testament *Book of Exodus* (3:14).[21] Whatever one thinks about Shakespeare's religious or metaphysical outlook is one's own business, but the fact is indisputable that he at least conceived of a godless universe—even if only through various characters—and never dedicated any of his poetry to the God to whom Milton believed all praise was due.[22]

Rather Shakespeare's speaker addressed the bulk of his sonnets to a character we have come to call the "Young Man," who was apparently so good looking that the speaker's primary purpose throughout the first part of the sequence was to convince the Young Man to reproduce, in order to multiply his beauty so that it is not lost from the world, and since that seems never to happen, to preserve the Young Man's beauty through verse.[23] Regardless of the sex of the subject, such a worshipful disposition toward

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[21] For a delightful discussion of Shakespeare's plays from an atheist perspective, see Eric S. Mallin, *Godless Shakespeare*. London: Continuum, 2007.

[22] It might be objected that Sonnet 146 works against my argument, as many readers have seen it as Shakespeare's most religious poem; however as Paterson points out the sonnet is "not religious at all. It's an angry poem, a self-disgusted poem: it says the body is a lousy home for the soul, which ends enslaved to its gaudy, pointless, sensual, self-consuming worldliness" (447).

[23] I purposely look past the blatant issue of the speaker's homosexuality because, for Milton, this would have been just as bad had the subject of the poems been a woman. If not—which is to say, if Milton thought Shakespeare's homosexuality something *extra* bad—perhaps that could account for Milton's awkward treatment of Shakespeare, who seems to have made Milton conspicuously uncomfortable. However for our present purposes we can bracket the issue of the speaker's (and Shakespeare's possible) homosexuality. Paterson's view on the topic of Shakespeare's homoeroticism is so particularly engaging that I cannot resist quoting his parenthetical statement: "The question 'was Shakespeare gay?' is so stupid as to be barely worth answering, but for the record: of *course* he was. Arguably he was a bisexual, of sorts; though for all the wives, mistresses and children I'm not entirely convinced by his heterosexual side. Mostly, his heart just wasn't in it; when it was, his expressions of heterosexual love are full of self-disgust" (XII). Stephen Booth, on the other hand, believes the poem "is, as readers have traditionally thought, a Christian exhortation to reject transient pleasures and gain eternal life" (516). For three classic arguments discussing this claim, see: Donald A. Stauffer, "Critical Principles and a Sonnet," *The American Scholar,* XII (Winter 1942-43) pp. 52-62; B.C. Southam, "Shakespeare's Christian Sonnet. No. 146," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, XXV (Winter 1960), 67-71; and Charles A. Huttar, "The Christian Basis of Shakespeare's Sonnet 146," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, XIX (Autumn 1968), 355-65. For a recent biography of Milton that

anything besides God constitutes, for Milton, idolatry, among sins the very worst. Imagine, for example, Milton reading the first quatrain to Shakespeare's "sonnet 105:"

> Let not my love be called idolatry,
> Nor my beloved as an idol show,
> Since all alike my songs and praises be,
> To one, of one, still such, and ever so . (1-4)

In a slippery, ironic style, Shakespeare frames his love as innocent of the sin of idolatry, since idolatry is characterized by the worship of false gods; but you, my love, are no false god. This poem does not express a worshipful disposition toward any false god but, quite the contrary, worships only the "One True God." Viewed from a Christian perspective, this is not simple blasphemy, this is amplified blasphemy; sacrilege emphasized, as if to taunt the very notion of anything sacred that is not the Young Man's beauty. Thus in Shakespeare's sonnets the speaker's attitude toward the Young Man mirrors Milton's attitude toward his own God, and for Milton such a displaced piety would have implied just the enslavement (in Milton's view to sin) that the speaker admits in the opening quatrain of Sonnet 57:

> Being your slave what should I do but tend
> Upon the hours and times of your desire?
> I have no previous time at all to spend;
> Nor services to do, till you require. (1-4)

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suggests first with great subtlety and then more directly that in his relationship with Charles Diodati that Milton "appears to have been in love with a man" (81), see: Anna Beers, *Milton: Poet, Pamphleteer, and Patriot* (81).

Emphasizing his enslavement to the Young Man's beauty—or as Milton would have conceived it, his enslavement to sin—the speaker continually verifies the Christian notion that such sin is like "miry clay," such that once one becomes a little involved the sin has power to take over the sinner's freedom. As if imprisoned by the very idea, Shakespeare's speaker expresses the same conceit again in the opening stanza of the next poem, Sonnet 58:

> That god forbid, that made me first your slave,
> I should in thought control your times of pleasure,
> Or at your hand th'account of hours to crave,
> Being your vassal, bound to stay your leisure. (1-4)

Moreover in the latter sonnet, not only is the speaker announcing his servitude to earthly man—something Milton devoted his entire literary career to fighting—he manages to use the deity's name in vain. Everywhere we look in Shakespeare's poetry, we see not only a refusal to take seriously the scheme of belief that meant so much to Milton, but an open mockery of it.

Thus especially in his youth, Milton made a habit of purposefully setting himself apart from Shakespeare, and in *Lycidas* ironically it is the very thing the two have in common that makes them so distinct: their respective uses of poetry in seeking immortality. When the swain wonders why anyone would devote a life to writing poetry in the first place, Phoebus Apollo answers "Fame."[24] But in so responding the pagan god of poetry articulates two separate types of fame to be achieved through verse, one that

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[24] John Milton, *Lycidas.* 64-70. For perspectives on Miltonic "fame" and "glory" as synonymous, see R.B. Jenkins' *Milton and the Theme of Fame.* Mouton, The Hague: 1978. See also: Arnold Stein's *Heroic Knowledge: An Interpretation of* Paradise Regained *and* Samson Agonistes. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1957.

sounds like the earthly, "partial" version found in Horace and Shakespeare, and the other more the Biblical, spiritual immortality found in the Spenser:

> Fame is the spur that the clear spirit doth raise
> (That last infirmity of noble mind)
> To scorn delights, and live laborious days;
> But the fair guerdon when we hope to find,
> And think to burst out into sudden blaze,
> Comes the blind Fury with th' abhorred shears,
> And slits the thin-spun life. "But not the praise,"
> Phoebus replied, and touched my trembling ears.
> "Fame is no plant that grows on mortal soil,
> Nor in the glistering foil
> Set off to th' world, nor in broad rumor lies,
> But lives and spreads aloft by those pure eyes,
> And perfect witness of all-judging Jove;
> As he pronounces lastly on each deed,
> Of so much fame in Heav'n expect thy meed. (70-84)[25]

Milton's Apollo first characterizes "fame " in the sense in which we typically understand the term, the worldly success that makes one well known "in broad rumor"; Milton sees this as a lesser, short-lived type of fame that Puritans such as he would have scorned as "vainglory." According to William B. Hunter's *Milton Encyclopedia*, the notion of vainglory signifies "vanity, pomp, boasting, and other types of ostentatious display . . . In *CD* Milton gives no definition or analysis of the term but lists it along with such vices as arrogance and boasting as being opposed to the virtue of lowliness of mind (*modestia*)" (116). For Milton, earthly fame, earthly riches, these were vainglorious prizes, the pursuit

[25] For a perspective that links line 75-76 "to the mythopoeic digression which concludes the first 'sestiad'" of Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*, see Nicholas McDowell, "'Lycidas' and the Influence of Anxiety" in *The Oxford Handbook of Milton* (112-135).

of which can easily distract the wayfaring Christian from this "straight and narrow" path. Rather than such earthly renown, fame in the eyes of men, Apollo's decree carves out a space for a separate, higher type of fame in the eyes of "all-judging Jove," that goes above and beyond vainglorious fame "to th' world." Milton's otherworldly notion of "fame" in *Lycidas* accords with Spenser's use in sonnet 75 of his *Amoretti*, a preservation fantasy of his own:

> One day I wrote her name upon the strand,
> But came the waves and washed it away:
> Agayne I wrote it with a second hand,
> But came the tyde, and made my paynes his pray.
> Vayne man, sayd he, that doest in vaine assay,
> A mortall thing so to immortalize.
> For I my selve shall lyke to this decay,
> And eek my name bee wiped out lykewize.
> Not so, (quod I) let baser things devize,
> To dy in dust, but you shall live by fame:
> My verse your virtues rare shall eternize,
> And in the heavens write your glorious name:
> Where whenas death shall all the world subdew,
> Our love shal live, and later life renew.

In Spenser's expression of the "preservation fantasy," "fame" is the vehicle by which his verses will enable his subject to live on, as opposed to those "baser things" which "dy in dust" (9-10), as Spenser's version of fame promises to write the subject's "glorious" name "in the heavens," looking forward to a post-apocalyptic time when "Our love shall live and later life renew" (12, 14). This mystical, open-ended version of time that finds expression in Spenser's poetic endeavors to cope with death well accords with Milton's: theirs is a spiritual model of regeneration and repetition. Eternity is open, not closed.

Discussing Milton's "On Shakespeare," Kunin has it that the poet's first verses published in English represent a "serious, articulate resistence" to Shakespeare's immortalizing as it "unquestioningly assumes that Shakespeare's preservation fantasy has been successfully realized" at a "cost" (102). I would suggest that "On Shakespeare" is a rare occasion on which we cannot rightly construe Milton's verses as "serious": rather, they are sarcastic, tongue-in-cheek. As in *At a Vacation Exercise*, or the poems on Hobson the university mail carrier, "On Shakespeare" gives us a lighter, more jocular Milton, purposely being ironic and writing in his lower style. And why should he be serious? According to Milton's worldview Shakespeare was a "fantastic" poet. Shakespeare's language was notoriously slippery, disorienting; one word or phrase could mean several things. Indeed, this is part of Shakespeare's art. For Milton, though, such wordplay is frivolous and distracting; it is present in Milton's poetry, but always suspect, as it tends to be Milton's evil characters such as Satan who use slippery language.[26] in this particular poem, Milton himself becomes the mocking satirist and uses Shakespeare's own slippery, pun laden style against him. Thus before we assent that Milton's speaker "unquestioningly assumes" Shakespeare has succeeded in his "preservation fantasy," we must open up our readings to accommodate the alternative meanings latent in the text. For example, it is generally accepted that the "unvalu'd Book" to which Milton refers is not the sonnets, but the first folio of Shakespeare's plays, and as noted above, "unvalu'd" could just as easily have meant worthless as priceless. In fact, Laertes means the former

[26] Conversely, in *Paradise Regained*, Milton offers the very simple, straightforward, unambiguous language of a human Christ to exemplify what he considered a morally straightforward style of communication.

when he says to Ophelia that Hamlet may not "as unvalued persons do, / Carve for himself" (1.3.18-19).

While scholars have generally agreed *Lycidas* exemplifies Milton's "grand style," they have traditionally disagreed concerning two main cruxes:[27] what is the nature of that "two-handed engine at the door," and why does Milton's poetic voice shift to the third person in the final stanza: "Thus sang the uncouth swain" (186, 130). Dealing with the former difficulty, Tayler has been perhaps the most convincing, arguing that the poem refers to St. Peter standing at Death's door with his pair of keys, one to Heaven and the other to hell; thus the "two-handed" engine represents the final judgment that, according to Christian mythology we all face when we die. John Leonard also reasons that "'at the door' is a biblical locution that denotes Christ's imminent return," and that as with Milton's use of the phrase in Animadversions, the "'two-handed engine' is an instrument of judgment" (262). Placed at the end of a stanza about bad shepherds, this is difficult not to read as a revenge fantasy on behalf of Milton, who obliquely implies that famous poets like Jonson and Shakespeare have had their rewards already, during life, and will face a rough time in the hereafter.[28]

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[27] Recently, there has also been some contention about a third issue in the poem: for the view that the "pilot of the Galilean lake" is not St. Peter but rather Christ, see M.J. Edwards, "The Pilot and the Keys: Milton's *Lycidas* 167-71 in *Studies in Philology.* Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2011. Christopher Hill also makes this suggestion in *Milton and the English Revolution: "*'the pilot of the Galilean lake' sounds like St. Peter, the good bishop; but again we can read other things into it. If you object to bishops, the pilot can be the good pastor, the preacher, Jesus Christ even: there is only one identification—the Pope—that we are clearly not intended to make" (50).

[28] Critics have taken various approaches to answering this question of the "two-handed engine." David Sansone takes this to be Jesus. See "How Milton Reads: Scripture, the Classics, and That Two-Handed Engine." Offering a perspective grounded in bibliography and textual studies, James Kelly and Catherine Bray argue that the "two-handed engine" actually signifies the printing press in "The Keys to Milton's

The latter difficulty, concerning the shift to third-person narrative voice, implies that Milton was, in fact, becoming Milton; in the final stanza, when the narrative takes a step back (so to speak) we realize the voice of the narrator all along has not, in fact, been Milton's own but a character identified as a "swain" whom a Milton on the rise has already outgrown. And while at the end we may characterize the narrator of the final stanza as Milton, we can only do so with a hint of doubt. After the first confusing shift it would be foolish to hasten to such a conclusion. We cannot actually say who is speaking; rather, it is only the poem that speaks. If we read Milton's claim charitably, it is the muse. But regardless of where we stand on that question—which is for most readers not even a question, however important it truly is—the poet performs in *Lycidas* what he intends to perform in his poetic career: he puts himself to the side and allows the poem itself to speak through him.

John Henry Raleigh noted that "*Lycidas* is an existential poem . . . it is about 'becoming,' the emergence of the ego to its full power" (317). The mysterious narrative shift in the final stanza represents this powerful ego's emergence. Reading the "Miltonic, self-representational signature" on the poem, Stephen Fallon observes that it is "marked by an egotism that is not eclipsed but expressed through the gestures of self-occlusion" (69). The speaker of the first 185 lines was identified with *Lycidas*, with Edward King, with Ben Jonson and Shakespeare and Horace and Spenser, but that speaker—the youthful "not ready yet" Milton—would bid farewell to the pastoral mode and be laid to

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'Two-Handed Engine' in *Lycidas* (1637). For a level-headed perspective that takes the two-handed engine to be St. Peter, see: Edward Tayler, *Milton's Poetry: It's Development in Time* (45-59).

rest. Here we have evidence of what Gordon Teskey calls "the impulse to make each poem seem a preparation for something larger than itself . . . a reflex in almost all Milton's early poems, from the greeting of the English language in the 'Vacation Exercise' to the farewell to pastoral" at the conclusion of *Lycidas* (149). Thus in his pastoral elegy, the young Milton not only endeavors to elevate himself beyond poets like Ben Jonson and Shakespeare, but surmounts even himself as the young shepherd who began the poem, thus making his main point that another, greater poet is on the ascent.

Chapter 4: "Too Much Conceiving": A New Reading of Milton's "On Shakespeare"

> I shall not instance an abstruse Author, wherein the King might be less conversant, but one whom wee well know was the Closet Companion of these his solitudes, *William Shakespeare*; who introduces the Person of *Richard* the third, speaking in as high a strain of pietie, and mortification as is utterd in any passage of this Book; and sometimes to the same sense and purpose. (Milton, *CPW* 3:361)

In the above quotation, Milton points out the ousted King Charles' literary familiarity with Shakespeare and he means it as an insult.[1] To be sure, the object of this indignity was Charles, but as Lois Potter notes, Milton's implication in pointing out that Charles liked to read Shakespeare was meant to indicate that the self-proclaimed poet-king had a "trivial mind" (84). Comparing Charles to the villainous Richard III, Shakespeare's "poet king," Milton was not being particularly kind to "the Poet" either, (he names him but once, refers to him several times), making it clear he was only drawing from such low-brow reading as Elizabethan drama so Charles would be able to understand. A few lines after insulting both the recently departed king and the recently departed poet, who happened to be Charles' favorite, Milton insulted them both again: for even "the worst of Kings, professing Christianism, have by far exceeded [Charles]. They, for ought we know, have still prayed their own, or at least borrowed from fitt Authors" (3:361).[2] That is to say, even the worst of kings were able to fake it better than Charles;

[1] For more on Milton's style of insulting, see John K. Hale's essay, "Milton and the Rationale of Insulting" in *Milton and Heresey.*

[2] It may be, in fact, that these two phrases represent the first time Milton mentions Shakespeare in *Eikonoklastes.* Earlier in the tract, Milton suggests the king's literary endeavors are an attempt to win the favor of the English people by imitating Shakespeare. Milton writes, "quaint Emblems and devices, begg'd from the old Pageantry of some Twelf-nights entertainment at *Whitehall*, will doe but ill to make a Saint or Martyr: and if the People resolve to take him Sainted at the rate of such a Canonizing, I shall suspect thir

his false piety is not even believable.[3] In these rarely quoted passages of *Eikonoklastes*—Milton's Council-ordered response to Charles' *Eikon Basilike*—and writing with all the candor of his "left hand," amid the flurry of punches Milton throws at Charles he manages to land one or two fairly stiff ones on Shakespeare. Apparently, "Fancy's childe," as Milton had termed him in *L'Allegro*, was not a "fit author."[4] Considering Milton's remarks about Shakespeare in 1649, when Milton is 40 years old, and since Milton has traditionally been thought to have generally approved of his great predecessor, the current and final chapter will take a fresh look at the attitude Milton expresses toward his subject twenty years earlier, in 1630 (or so), in his early verses "On Shakespeare."[5]

Readers have predominantly understood Milton's first poem printed in English, "On Shakespeare," simply as a work of praise, though not a very compelling one. Barbra Lewalski reckons the poem only "reworks the conventional conceit that a poet's best monument is his works," and "explicitly claims the Bard as [Milton's] model" (41). In Stephen Dobranski's *Cambridge Introduction to Milton* you will also find the traditional view that the poet "wrote enthusiastically about the playwright . . . consciously allying

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Calendar more then the *Gregorian*." Milton may or may not have known that Shakespeare's mid-winter comedy about the Festival of the Epiphany played at Whitehall in 1607, and in stating that he would doubt the people's calendar should they assent to such a mode of "canonizing," Milton also seems to imply that they just might; in other words, though he hoped they would know better, Milton did not put it past the people to be had by such seductive means as a Shakespearean masque. Milton hoped better readers for himself, admitting they are "few perhaps, but those few, of such value and substantial worth, as truth and wisdom, not respecting numbers and bigg names, but been ever wont in all ages to be contented with."

[3] Michel Foucault greatly admired Shakespeare for his ability to expose what is inherently "grotesque" about kingship: "I am calling 'grotesque' the fact that . . . a discourse or an individual can have effects of power that their intrinsic qualities should disqualify them from having . . . The problem of the infamy of sovereignty, of the discredited sovereign, is, after all, Shakespeare's problem" (11-13).

[4] It is possible that in a fit of Learean rage Milton is overstating his disdain for Shakespeare here, for he cannot mean this in earnest; perhaps Shakespeare is caught up in the line of fire—it is, after all, not his fault Charles liked him and quoted him. Regardless, it is impossible to deny that here Milton seems to have directed a bit of his own contumely toward great predecessor.

[5] Our dating of "On Shakespeare" is not exact, but it was written in 1630 or 1631.

himself with England's other great poet" (59). Biographer David Masson, however, seemed to think it quite compelling, and went so far as to call Milton a Shakespeare "worshipper," perhaps overstating it a bit: "to this day, I repeat, there is no nobler expression of Shakespeare-enthusiasm in our language than this from Milton" (1:332).[6] Ever the Milton enthusiast, Masson noted that the young poet "had been reading the obituary verses to Shakespeare by Ben Jonson and Leonard Digges, prefixed in the First Folio, and in his own lines merely amplified an idea already expressed in both those pieces" (1:236). But not all readers have found the verses so uncomplicated. William Riley Parker, for example, was confounded by the poem because while it includes required elements of praise, it "tells us almost nothing of his attitude toward his subject," leaving Parker to "wonder why he wrote the poem in the first place" (1:90). Dazed and confused as he was, Parker noted one "remarkable thing": Milton eulogizes "a great playwright without a single reference to his plays" (1:90).[7] Rather, the poem specifically addresses Shakespeare as a poet. Endeavoring to clear up Parker's confusion, this chapter will uncover alternative meanings latent in the text of "On Shakespeare," hypothesizing that Milton's poem not only praises but ironically, even humorously, challenges his subject, the great William Shakespeare.

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[6] We have to wonder how Milton, well known for his lifelong iconoclasm, would have liked being identified as a Shakespeare "worshipper." Surely, Masson meant no harm when he inadvertently accused Milton of idolatry, the sin he hated most. These kinds of grand overstatements are characteristic of Masson, and tell us less about Milton's view of Shakespeare and more of Masson's enthusiasm for Milton.

[7] This observation may not be entirely true. While in the *Poems 1645* the final word of line 10 reads "heart," in the original Second Folio publications it reads "part," which could have been a reference to Shakespeare's theatrical career. I will discuss this emendation in greater detail later in this chapter.

At the time when Milton was negotiating the terms of his own vocation—fueled by the high ambition to become not a, but *the* great English poet—in these early verses he began to fashion himself as England's *vates*, characterizing Shakespeare as a poet of a lower order: not *vates*, but an ordinary *poeta*. Milton's Shakespeare was no Virgil, no prophet/poet with the high responsibility of representing his nation. He was a "maker" who pleased audiences by skillfully joining words, a worldly, time-bound poet who gathered his creative material from his imagination rather than an otherworldly, eternal poet who received his prophetic lines from a heavenly muse.[8] Shakespeare's "easy numbers" filled audiences with delight, but they were not spiritually instructive, nor did they carry the sacred import of scripture. They were not divine, but distinctively human; they came not from a heavenly spirit, channeled through the gravely ascetic pen of one who believed himself in the service of God, but from the world, channeled through the leveling pen of a man given to write breathtaking meditations on high matters such as love or the meaning of life alongside silly puns about sex or flatulence.[9]

If we read Milton's light, elegeic work "On Shakespeare" alongside his other, weightier poems, obvious distinctions can be noted in their relative tones, depending on the gravity he invests in his subjects. He expressed this distinction to his friend Charles

[8] I wish to urge here that Milton truly believed himself to be doing the work of a God he took seriously; while twenty-first century humanists are quite likely to laugh that aside (and for understandable reasons), it is still imperative that we take the point into consideration when reading and discussing Milton. William Kerrigan elaborates this imperative in the Introduction to *Prophetic Milton.*

[9] Later in his life, Milton would indicate his aesthetic distaste for mixing comedy and tragedy. In his preface to *Samson Agonistes*, Milton distinguishes his drama from the works of his contemporaries by avoiding "the poet's error of intermixing comic stuff with tragic sadness and gravity; or introducing trivial and vulgar persons, which by all judicious hath been counted absurd; and brought in without discretion, corruptly to gratify the people."

Diodati in *Elegy 6*, drawing a hard line between "light elegy" which is simply meant to be fun and can be (and is indeed perhaps best) written on a belly full of wine, as opposed to that which is composed by a greater, more serious kind of poet:

> he who tells of wars, and of heaven under the rule of Jove in his maturity, and reverent heroes and semi-divine leaders, and sings now of the sacred deliberations of the supreme gods, now of the deep realm where the fierce dog barks—let him live sparingly, like the master of Samos, and let plants provide him with harmless food; let the clearest water stand nearby in a beechwood vessel, and let him drink sober drafts from a pure spring. Add to this a youth free of crime and chaste, and strict morals, and a hand free from stain . . . For a bard is sacred to the gods, and a preist to the gods, and both his hidden heart and his mouth breath forth Jove. (192)

Of this serious poetic mode Milton offers for example his most recent verses, the ode *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*, which he composed on Christmas morning of 1629, as an act of worship to and gift for the newly born Christ. These verses open with a prayer to the author's heavenly muse, and speak in a tone of the highest reverence for a subject that, for Milton, was of the deepest gravity. Or consider *The Passion*, which Milton began writing on the following Easter holiday only to abandon mid-project because he did not yet think himself worthy to approach a subject so lofty.[10] This religious, high reverence for his grand poetic subjects direct opposes the playful attitude we find, for example, in his ironic works about the university mail carrier, "Here lies old Hobson, Death hath broke his girt, / And here alas, hath laid him in the dirt" (1), or a popular playwright—for whom no joke is too buffoonish to include in even the gravest of tragedies. Moreover,

[10] This dating of the Nativity Ode comes from a Latin verse letter, *Elegy 6*, from Milton to his closet childhood friend, Charles Diodati.

Shakespeare had been receiving voluminous public praise as, quite possibly, the greatest English poet. In the First Folio, the verses by Hugh Holland refer to him as "Poet's King." As does Jonson, calling Shakespeare "not of an age, but for all time," Leonard Digges calls him "fresh to all ages," imagining that "when Posteritie / Shall loath what's new, that all is prodegie / That is not Shakespeare's" (7-9). Ben Jonson's adoring lines called the late playwright the "Soule of the Age" (18), indeed the very "star of poets" (77) to whom "all scenes of Europe homage owe" (42). Surely, this extravagent praise from the nation's Poet Laureate for a poet so different from Milton could have threatened the young poet's high ambitions, especially since, in Milton's mind, Shakespeare was not cut out to be England's great poet. Ever serious about his bid for this heightened office, Milton endeavored to conquer and surpass the famous Shakespeare by framing him as a poet of a lower, less eternally significant type.[11]

This rejection is complicated, however, because Milton enjoyed Shakespeare, recognized his extraordinary abilities, drew from his work, sometimes quite liberally, and apparently delighted in reading him.[12] But for many Puritans, (though perhaps not for

[11] Describing Milton's "Puritan tone," Edgar Elmer Stoll writes that Milton "does not scorn pleasure but he is wary of it. His loins are girt, his lamp is lighted, and his eyes are lifted up to the hills, whence cometh his help. Not that he is rapt, ecstatic, or blindly confident. He is no visionary, no enthusiast; on the contrary he has a vein of melancholy in him. Yet it is not that of Spenser or Shakespeare, of Shelley or Byron; it is neither the lover's melancholy nor the poet's, half-sweet. It is no complaint to moon or stars, no invocation to death. It is rather the melancholy of one whose faith is strong but whose hope is remote; who has been through the war, and seen his own and others' high expectations defeated and their reforms thwarted, and the righteous man put down and the wicked exalted in his place. His eye hath kept watch o'er man's mortality, and man's frailty as well. But his faith does not waver, his hope is not quenched. His spirit is steadfast, not bent upon the glorious but vain and fleeting shows of this world, like that of a humanist, but raised above them" (244). It may be noted that Stoll also does not say anything about Shakespeare's influence on Milton.

[12] Most commonly noted are the ways Milton's *A Masque* was influenced Shakespearean comedies like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *The Tempest.* However it has also been noted that

Milton, who was far from the most culturally conservative among them), spending time at leisure consuming the works of an author who frequently used lewd and bawdy puns to entertain his audience was like spending time on the listening end of a bar-room tale told by Lucio; perhaps his stories were outlandish and funny, but sitting there idly listening to them would have been considered sinful or at least questionable. Despite our lack of knowledge concerning Milton's actual reading practices of Shakespeare, we can safely assume that he read all his workswhen he returned from college to his father's country homes at Hammersmith and Horton. Milton described this period as a time of "studious retirement," self-directed reading and writing practice to better prepare him for what he believed to be his divine service. It was during this time of leisure, according to David Masson, that Milton composed "On Shakespeare" on a blank leaf in his father's copy of the First Folio. In other words, a copy of F1 open before him, Milton himself seems to have passed a great many hours astonished with too much conceiving; then he wrote a poem, literally "on" Shakespeare. Perhaps it is this ambivalence toward Shakespeare that created such tension; but for whatever reason, the tension is discernible, and it is this literary phenomenon the chapter will explore, after a preliminary discussion of the latest criticism concerning this strange little poem.[13]

Milton was influenced by Shakespeare's tragedies as well, particularly in his depictions of evil characters, Comus and Satan, who reveal traces of Shakespearean villains such as Lady Macbeth, Richard III, and Iago.

[13] I owe this idea to a fascinating discussion with Colonel Dave Harper, who pointed out to me that Milton seems to have indulged some particular interest in writing poems literally "on" things by his recollection that Milton's Sonnet 8, "Captain or Colonel, or Knight in Arms" was written as a message a poet affixes to his door during wartime in hopes of persuading a soldier to spare the poet's life: "lift not thy spear against the Muses Bowre."

Gordon Campbell locates the "ultimate origins" of Milton's poem "On Shakespeare" in the village of Tong, in Shropshire, with the epigraph engraved on the tomb of one Sir Thomas Stanley. That Milton's poem is modeled after Stanley's monument seems clear since "[b]oth rhyme 'bones' and 'stones' and 'fame' and 'name,' and perhaps most strikingly, the original of Milton's 'star-ypointing pyramid' is recognizable in this poem's 'sky-aspiring pyramids,' which conveys the same idea in the same rhythm" (96). Campbell's essay on these early Miltonic verses takes readers on a walking tour through four English archives, perusing what seem like alternative versions of the epitaph on Stanley's tomb. These other manuscripts are, at least, similar epitaphs to Stanley, or sometimes "Standley," that echo the same language and basic theme: the life and fame of the deceased will be lengthened not by stones but by his memory in the minds of the living, and that "Standley for whom this stands shall stand in Heaven."[14] Moreover, some of these manuscripts include possible yet questionable attributions to Shakespeare, an attribution that in Campbell's estimation "does not seem . . . improbable" (99). If we assume, therefore, that Milton had seen the inscription before 1630—or if we assume at least that whether true or not, the attribution was current in the seventeenth century—then we might imagine Milton modeled "On Shakespeare" after verses he believed to be written by Shakespeare.[15]

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[14] Common to all four manuscripts that match the inscription on Stanley's tomb, this line is the final line in three.

[15] Pointing out questions that further complicate his argument, such as "how Milton might have known about the poem, given that he seems never to have visited Tong and that the poem was never printed," Campbell gives a shrug, noting that "many manuscripts survive, and that Milton, like Shakespeare, was connected with the Stanley family" (100).

If Campbell's "not improbable" suggestion seems tenuous there is good reason to hesitate. It is hardly persuasive, for example, to stress the rhyme of "bones" and "stones" as if it were unique to Stanley's epitaph or even unusual enough to qualify as pertinent evidence. The same rhyme as Campbell acknowledges appears on Shakespeare's own self-penned engraving. For Campbell, this similarity evinces that Shakespeare probably did compose Stanley's epitaph, along with three "other versions" he found bearing Shakespeare's name. The attribution is troubling, however, since Milton wrote his poem in 1630 and Thomas Stanley didn't die until 1632. For the encryption to have influenced Milton's "On Shakespeare," it would have had to already be there on the tomb of an elder Thomas Stanley, who died in 1576. If the latter were the case, then it is indeed possible—however unlikely—that Stanley's epitaph was written by a (very) young Shakespeare, age 12.

Whether Shakespeare wrote Stanley's epigraph or not, we can still find other instances of poets who would have been familiar to both Shakespeare and Milton rhyming "bones" and "stones" or "name" and "fame." Take, for example, the following couplet from the preface to Golding's translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*:

> Some woorshipt al the hoste of heaven: some deadmens ghostes & bones:
> Sum wicked feends: sum wormes and fowles, herbes, fishes, trees and stones. (Preface 13-14)

There is nothing remarkable or unique in the rhyming of the words "bones" and "stones" on a graveyard epitaph: "stones" form the surface on which the epitaph is written and "bones" are what is in the tomb. The other rhyme to which Campbell points—"fame"

with "name"—is likewise not unique to Shakespeare, and it too has been used by poets with whom Shakespeare and Milton would have been familiar. Take, for example, sonnet 75 of Spenser's *Amoretti*:

> Not so, (quod I) let baser things devize,
> To dy in dust, but you shall live by fame:
> My verse your virtues rare shall eternize
> And in the heavens write your glorious name. (9-12)

Like "bones" and "stones," "fame" and "name" seem a pair of words not to spring from the peculiar, idiosyncratic mind of a single poet but, rather, more or less destined to appear together on dead men's monuments. The identification of Stanley's epitaph as a source for Milton's poem based on such evidence seems tenuous at best. The whole point of memorializing the dead is, after all, to extend the life of their name—their earthly fame—and there are, alas, only so many words in English that rhyme with "name." In the last analysis, these rhymes are a bit too obvious and conventional to form the basis of such an assertion.

The "star-ypointing pyramid" that Campbell claims has its origin in the "sky aspiring pyramid" of Stanley's epitaph offers no greater proof than the rhymes, since pyramids were a common structure used to memorialize royalty. The famous pyramids in Egypt are the tombs of kings, and Milton would have known this. It is again nothing peculiar to Shakespeare's thinking but, rather, essential to the nature of a pyramid that it offers the strongest structural bulwark to stand against the destructive passage of time. Indeed, in terms of monumental structures, no other design does a better job; in 1680 Sir William Temple wrote "[t]he Rules of Architecture . . . teach us that the Pyramid is of all

Figures the firmest" (1.105). In other words, a pyramid is the structure most likely to stand the longest; a pyramid is forever. To bury a king beneath an ediface that points toward Heaven is to say the king is not dead but, rather, lives eternally. And the trope of pyramids as monumental structures extending the lives of royal figures was common to classical and Renaissance poets; witness the following excerpt from Ode 30 in Horace's third book of odes:

> I have finished a monument more lasting than bronze and loftier
> than the Pyramid's royal pile, one that no wasting rain, no furious
> north wind can destroy, or the countless chain of years and the ages'
> flight. (3:30)

The pyramidal monument as a means to the immortalize dead kings would have been well known to Milton, so to suggest that Shakespeare should not be entombed beneath a pyramid is to suggest that he should not be entombed like a king. Indeed, for Milton, an iconoclast to the end, even a king shouldn't be entombed like a king; men should not be kings at all. Much less should Shakespeare, a poet who made a lot of money but never paid credit to any muse.[16]

The y-prefix Milton uses to describe the pyramid as "star-ypointing" has engendered disagreement among scholars and deserves attention here.[17] As noted by

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[16] Ian Mortimer tells that in his latter days, Shakespeare came back to Stratford and took up residence in the "most prestigious house in the town: New Place, built by Sir Hugh Clopton—the man who constructed the bridge. It is three stories high and timber-framed, with brick between the timbers, not willow and plaster-work. Five bays wide, it has one large window on either side of the central porch, five windows on the floor above, and five on the floor above that . . . The whole proud edifice is a fitting tribute to a successful businessman" (3). Shakespeare's opulent home was sure to have gained him a reputation as a writer whose art had made him financially wealthy, though he may actually have generated more of his wealth by trading in grains.

[17] See bibliographical studies by R.M. Smith (1928), and William Todd (1952).

Kerrigan *et al*, this particular archaism was "popularized by Spenser" and usually joined to past participles, however here is employed in the present. Deciding this must have been a "mistake" on Milton's part, Campbell argues "[t]he fact that one of the later issues amends this to 'y-pointed' merely reflects that someone was correcting Milton's error; Milton, if we was aware of this variant, seems to have dug in in defense of his mistake, because in the later texts 'y-pointing' is restored" (100). I would suggest, however, that poetry need not always abide so strictly by the rules of grammar—which were hardly "set in stone" at that time—and more likely Milton makes this choice carefully and to a purpose. The bringing together of a past participle and a present tense verb could indicate, for example, that the dead poet were still living; the very reason that Milton also finds a pyramid inappropriate. At least in part, the subtext of Milton's "On Shakespeare" declares quite bluntly, as bluntly as subtext can, that Shakespeare is dead. He is no more. The "honoured bones" of his remains represent the "labor of an age in piled stones." In other words, if we hear the enjambed phrase in these two lines, they are the labor not of "all time," as Ben Jonson would have it, but of a certain time: one that has come and passed. Milton's Shakespeare is not an eternal poet, but one bound by time; he was not the type of poet who would need a monument that suggested an eternal relevance. Such a monument would be far more fitting on the tomb of a poet like Virgil, Spenser, or of course, Milton himself.

If the verses on Stanley's tomb had been on Milton's mind when we wrote "On Shakespeare" it seems more likely that it would have been for another reason: the tomb's pompous and luxurious nature. The final lines of "On Shakespeare" suggest that he

thought maybe Shakespeare's tomb was already a bit too fancy: "And so Sepulcher'd in such pompe dost lie / That Kings, for such a Tombe would wish to die" (13-14). During Milton's time, and especially to a Christian, the word "pomp" carried a negative connotation, reflecting the "vainglory" of this world, such as in the *Book of Common Prayer* referring to "the devil and all his pomps;" or "the pomps and vanities of this wicked world." Because they were rich nobles, the members of the Stanley family were immortalized by expensive likenesses of themselves carved into stone, in a rich, kingly tomb that would surely have aroused Milton's protestant indignation. To say that kings would "wish to die" for a tomb like the one in which Shakespeare is buried makes the point ironically and, indeed humorously, that Shakespeare's tomb is too fancy.

Bibliographical and textual issues considered, next we move to an attentive reading of the poem itself after a few preliminary remarks. First: the poem itself is full of equivocations; it is almost always saying two things. Like most of its sixteen lines, the very title speaks equivocally. Masson tells us that originally, "On Shakespeare" was "probably written on the blank leaf of a copy of the Folio Shakespeare of 1623, the only edition of Shakespeare's collected plays" available to Milton (236). Thus the preposition "on" means both "Shakespeare as the subject of this poem," and Shakespeare as the actual, physical surface on which the poem is written. Milton wrote several such poems referring to this idea including Sonnet 8, wherein the speaker asks the reader to imagine he pens the poem on the poet's door to protect his house during wartime, and "On Time," which Milton at one time envisioned as "set on a clock case." In "On Shakespeare" we see a youthful Milton imitating the kind of polysemy for which his subject is so famous,

using puns, being sarcastic, ironic and clever, employing language that is like Shakespeare's, slippery and uncertain.

If we read the poem in its historical context, written in 1630 or 31, fifteen years after Shakespeare's death, it seems unlikely that a twenty-two-year old Milton would have wanted to contribute to the further glorification of "Shakespeare" as an industry, a brand. He was already quite exalted by the poet laureate Ben Jonson's famous poem in F1, as well as by the publication of F1 itself, and an upcoming second edition, very expensive and fine. Shakespeare worship had already begun around him, and Milton—a lifelong iconoclast—would have roundly objected, treating the "fantastic" subject of his poem with at least as much a sarcastic scoff as praise, particularly in a context in which another poet—Leonard Digges—has called Shakespeare the "king of poets." Milton's iconoclastic nature would not stand for that. Among other things, then, praise included, Milton's first verses published in English make an argument against the deification, or any further monumentalizing, of the dead poet.[18]

While he no doubt recognized Shakespeare's powerful literary abilities—"to the shame of slow endeavoring art," Shakespeare's "easy numbers flow"—Milton would not have recognized Shakespeare as a "true poet," let alone someone to idolize. In *An Apology for Smectymnuus*, Milton famously wrote that:

> he who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things, ought himself to be a true poem; that is, a composition and pattern of the best and honourablest things; not presuming to sing high

[18] While this point could certainly be argued either way—that shortening the subject's name to a single word, "Shakespeare," a name that needs no further praise—it seems to me more likely that such a subtitle was suitable for the Second Folio of Shakespeare's works but not for Milton, who boldly and outright praises Shakespeare like this nowhere else.

> praises of heroic men, or famous cities, unless he have in himself the experience and practice of all that which is praiseworthy. (*CPW* 1:890)

At first glace it seems hard to believe a thinker so gifted as Milton would adopt any "gestalt" identification of another poet's character, conflating the artist and the art into an inevitably oversimplified, however easily packaged personality, but that is just what Milton is asking us to do. In claiming the true poet "ought himself to be a true poem, . . . a composition," he implies that we can and should read that composition, and come away with a verdict. In this case, Milton's verdict concerning Shakespeare's personal "composition" was such that the playwright was in no way suited for the type of poetic office to which he aspired himself. According to Guillory, Milton would not have recognized the authority of the "merely human," since "authority is only made manifest in the act of acknowledgment" (xii). At a time when Shakespeare was achieving great fame—when the burgeoning book industry would soon produce a new, expensive folio edition of his works, and this alongside public discussion of a new monument to his greatness—Milton took aim at this "King of Poets," this Fancy's child, and sought to overthrow him, making way for himself to become the great English poet.

It is the equivocal irony, subtle enough to be easily missed, that enabled the poem to find publication in a book of Shakespeare's works. Partly in response to Ben Jonson's encomium in the first folio, partly in response to Shakespeare's self-written epitaph cursing anyone who moves his bones, and partly in response to a question David Masson suggests may have circulated around the time the poem was written, whether the English should erect a second monument to Shakespeare, Milton's poem delivers an oblique

elbow to the dead poet's ribs. Ben Jonson's contribution to the first folio glorifies Shakespeare eternally by claiming that he was "not of an age, but for all time!" Milton's poem seems to respond defiantly to Jonson, as if to say: no, Shakespeare was "of an age," and at that, one "in piled stones." In other words, Shakespeare was of an age that is now just as gone as the man himself. Moreover, Shakespeare's self-written epitaph on his grave at the Church of the Holy Trinity in Stratford-Upon-Avon addresses would-be grave robbers in the name of Christ:

> Good frend for Iesvs sake forbeare,
> To digg the dvst encloased heare.
> Bleste be ye man yt spares thes stones,
> And cvrst be he yt moves my bones.

Milton's poem seems to respond to this as well: Shakespeare warns passersby to leave his bones in the ground, and Milton says "what do you need your bones for?" In response to the question of building a new monument, Milton's debut poem asks a rhetorical question, answering flatly: "no." Masson thought the poem suggests "some talk in the year 1630, as there has been so often since, of erecting a great national monument to Shakespeare . . . and that Milton thought the project superfluous" (236). An iconoclast from the start, Milton, in his poem published in English, destroys the image of Shakespeare as a great poet, and does so by equivocation, just subtly enough that it finds publication in the Second Folio.[19]

[19] Neil Forsyth notes the presence of Milton's characteristic in the poem, pointing out a "hint of rivalry" in that it "shows great respect, as the context requires, for Shakespeare, but also a certain need to establish distance, for this newly arriving poet to carve out some space for himself" (30-31).

We can never know for certain how or why those lines found their way into the second Shakespeare edition. We only know Milton's father was a fellow of the Blackfriars, which only hints at an explanation, and we have no reason to assume Milton was actually commissioned to write the poem for the volume; perhaps he was, but it is at least equally possible that his father used his connections to get his son published, or, equally possible, he simply ran across the lines, recognized them as his son's, and took it to the publishers. Such are the unknowns we must accept. But we can infer, at least, that Milton's poem was no work of simple praise; rather, while it doubtless evinces a deep sense of admiration for the late poet, in another sense it was a ticking time bomb that took 400 years to explode, helping to clear the way for Milton to become what he aspired to be: not a, but the great poet. We move now to a line-by-line reading of the poem.

Line 1. What needs my Shakespeare for his honored bones?

In the opening line, Milton does at least two things. He responds to Shakespeare's self-written epitaph, however not speaking to his subject directly but to an audience with an implied familiarity with both poets. While the object of "needs" is "the labor of an age in piled stones," Milton may also be playfully alluding to Shakespeare's posthumous request for would-be grave robbers leave his bones in the ground. This would be a willful misreading on Milton's part, but as it is difficult for me to imagine that the opening line is not a response to Shakespeare's request, it seems at least possible that this is Milton opening the poem on a playful note. But the ostensible implication, of course, would be the conventional message expected of such a poem, that Shakespeare's bones are unimportant because his immortality is achieved through his poetry, in the

minds of his audience for years to come. Milton delivers that, as it is occasion's proper poetic due, and yet, there is something defiant in his tone. Masson notes that around the time Milton wrote these lines, people were possibly talking about building another monument to Shakespeare, a notion that was often considered. To a young, radical iconoclast, indeed one who would devote the rest of his life to the destruction of idols, Milton probably meant this as a rhetorical question that implies its own answer in the negative. What does he need those for? He has become, as Hotspur might say, "food for worms." Moreover, in this opening line we must take note, of course, of the name that Milton employs: "my Shakespeare." It sounds endearing, no doubt, but seems also to imply an underlying power relationship in which Milton enjoys the lion's share, while on the surface he is simultaneously praising, (however half-heartedly), and questioning, in earnest, that to which he actually rejected in full, the efficacy of physical monuments as immortalizing agents.

Line 2. The labor of an age in piled stones,

Ben Jonson's famous encomium in F1 praises Shakespeare as an eternal poet: "He was not of an age, but for all time!" Milton disagreed, and with a hint of defiance expressed his alternative view here in the second line, directly contradicting the poet laureate: Shakespeare's work was "of an age," and one "in piled stones," at that; in other words, Shakespeare was a time-bound poet who lived and wrote yesterday. Milton's conception of the *vates* included the notion that a prophetic poet—elevated to the level of priest—would not sing verses bound by time, but verses eternal; the type Milton envisions for himself, he defines against that normal type written by the ordinary *poeta* or

"maker," who takes material from the time-bound world and joins it together. What Milton read as Jonson's mischaracterization of Shakespeare as an eternal poet threatened to cast the latter in that role of England's *vates*, the very thing Milton wants to prevent. For Milton, Virgil or Spenser could have been called *vates* poets, but not Shakespeare.

Line 3. Or that his hallowed relics should be hid

In this line, it is difficult not to think of what has become known to Shakespeare scholars as "the Catholic question" when Milton refers to his predecessor's bones as "hallowed relics."[20] The *OED* gives the following definition of "relic":

> In the Christian Church, esp. the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches: the physical remains (as the body or a part of it) of a saint, martyr, or other deceased holy person, or a thing believed to be sanctified by contact with him or her (such as a personal possession or piece of clothing), preserved as an object of veneration and often enshrined in some ornate receptacle.

Milton surely employs this term with at least a hint of sarcasm. Not by any stretch of the imagination did Milton think of Shakespeare as a "saint, martyr, or other . . . holy person." As a Protestant, Milton opposed in general the Catholic practice known as "veneration of relics," placing divine value on "ancient" objects because they were believed to have been "sanctified by contact" with a someone holy. In *Paradise L*ost, a mature Milton will place relics among the various Catholic paraphernalia flying around in the winds of "The Paradise of Fools":

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[20] See: Burton Raffel, "Shakespeare and the Catholic Question," (35-51). For an argument that claims, rather forcefully, that Shakespeare was Catholic, see Claire Asquith's *Shadowplay*: *The Hidden Beliefs and Coded Politics of William Shakespeare,* (2006). We do not know, of course, what Shakespeare's outlook on religion was, nor even his family's religious background, but the strongest evidence for the view that his parents were Catholic is a secret tract professing Catholicism—illegal at the time—signed by the poet's father John Shakespeare.

then might ye see
Cowls, hoods and habits with their wearers tossed
And fluttered into rags, then relics, beads,
Indulgences, dispenses, pardons, bulls,
The sport of winds: all these upwhirled aloft
Fly o'er the backside of the world far off
Into a limbo large and broad, since called
The Paradise of Fools, to few unknown
Long after, now unpeopled, and untrod. (3.489-97)

In short: when Milton refers to Shakespeare's remains as "hallowed relics," he is not saying something nice. Perhaps he is mocking the great Shakespeare, taking him down a notch, or perhaps he is only mocking the type of superstition that would venerate Shakespeare with material signs or an edifice that is meaningless and ineffectual. But it is here Milton begins building up to his ultimate iconoclastic point: people are worshipping (hallowing) Shakespeare, far too much for Milton's comfort.

Line 4. Under a star-ypointing pyramid?

Since the y-prefix was popularized by Spenser, Milton underscores the distinction between the special type of poet known as *vates* and the ordinary *poeta* by contrasting Spenser and Shakespeare: why put a monument fit for Spenser on the tomb of a time-server like Shakespeare? The former was, by Milton's standards, a "true poet," divinely inspired. Therefore in asking "why monumentalize Shakespeare," he is asking, more specifically, "why monumentalize Shakespeare as though he were a true poet like Spenser?" The "y" prefix usually joined past participles, but here Milton joins it with the present tense. Assuming that Milton knew what he was doing here—and he must have—this purposeful error enables Milton to further ask why we would treat a time-bound poet,

indeed a dead poet, as though his verses would resonate outside the boundaries of earthly time. Chapter 1 gives a discussion of Milton's distinction between "time-bound," or earthly verses, and "eternal," or "divine" poetry, which can only be sung by the "true poet."

Line 5-6. Dear son of Memory, great heir of Fame,
What needs thou such weak witness of thy name?

An apostrophe to Shakespeare, this line marks the point at which the speaker shifts his addressee from the living to the dead Shakespeare himself, whom he calls by two names: the first of which implies that the bard was the brother of the nine muses, daughters of Zeus and Memory. Milton implies that Memory's "siren daughters," the type whose songs distracted sailors and lured them to come crashing into the rocks, are the sisters of Shakespeare, when he refers to this notion again in the Preface to Book II of *The Reason of Church Government*, announcing his plan to write

> a work not to be raised from the heat of youth or the vapors of wine, like that which flows at waste from the pen of some vulgar amorist or the trencher fury of a rhyming parasite, nor to be obtained by the invocation of Dame Memory and her siren daughters, but by devout prayer to that eternal Spirit who can enrich with all utterance and knowledge, and sends out his seraphim with the hallowed fire of his altar to touch and purify the lips of whom he pleases. (*CPW* 1:820-21)

Calling Shakespeare the son of Memory, then, or Mnemosyne for the Romans, Milton implies again that the material with which Shakespeare works is distinctly of this world, and usually taken from the classics, as Memory is the goddess that enables rote memorization, the development of language itself. But even if this gives Shakespeare some type of link to divinity, it is to a classical goddess, whose poetic authority Milton

has unambiguously displaced in the Nativity Ode, crowning Pan, who is understood in Milton's "golden-age eclogue" as in Spenser's, to be Christ, the new and undisputed God of Poets. Thus grouping him with these pagan sources, Milton classifies Shakespeare among a lower order of poets whose lips are not hallowed by the same fire as his own, Elijah-like, who took very seriously a notion that is now impossible in all but the most religious or open-minded among us to accept: that he was cosmically appointed as a channel through which would flow muse-delivered, heavenly verse. Framing himself as the Christian poet extraordinaire, Milton places Shakespeare among those pre-Christian poets on the lawn in the Nativity Ode, however without the same mitigating circumstances of living before the arrival of Christ.

Concerning the second name, "great heir of Fame," Milton acknowledges that at the time Shakespeare had already received a substantial amount of praise and renown, handed down to him from an ancient poetic tradition. In *Lycidas*, Milton gave his meditation on poetic fame outlining two types: time-bound fame, "that last infirmity of noble mind," and a higher type, available not to the ordinary *poeta* but only to the *vates*. For Milton, the latter, sacred type would not have characterized a poet like Shakespeare; it was only the former type, that "last infirmity of noble mind," that Shakespeare enjoyed until his death. In this couplet, Milton finishes his apostrophic question to the dead bard: what do you need with another monument? If people at the time were asking whether another monument to Shakespeare should be built, as has been suggested, then we can take Milton's question as a rhetorical one that answers in the negative. No, let us not further glorify Shakespeare.

Line 7-8. Thou in our wonder and astonishment
Hast built thyself a livelong monument

Milton claims, again, that Shakespeare does not need another monument; this is because he has already built one in the minds of his readers but, more specifically, in their faculties of "wonder and astonishment." We may be tempted to interpret this as a line of praise—since in Milton's time the wonder of intellectual curiosity was widely seen as virtuous, indeed the beginning of philosophy—until we recall that the mental state of "astonishment" is decidedly not a good thing in Milton. Nor is philosophy for that matter. Wonder is not necessarily good either; it can be good if indulged in moderation, but the wonder one brings to Shakespeare which results in astonishment would have been scary and perhaps even threatening. Milton's ideal *vates* poet should lead men toward truth, by way of the "chief" human faculty of "Reason," not confusion. In Book I of *Paradise Lost*, Satan wakes to find that his fallen army, his "associates and copartners . . . Lie thus astonished on th'oblivious pool" (1.266). Beelzebub remarks to Satan that the fallen angels lay "Groveling and prostrate on yon lake of fire, / As we erewhile, astounded and amazed" (1.280-81). Moreover, hell is where Milton puts the philosophers, still debating their endless debates in "wand'ring mazes lost." If Shakespeare's poetry has the same effect on readers as Satan's fall from "such a pernicious height"—generating not understanding but confusion—Milton would not have praised him for it. Thus Milton's poetry makes the claim, implicitly and explicitly, to *vates* status. Since his system of thought lays out a hierarchy of human faculties, of which "reason is chief," any poetry with real authority must lead men according to Reason—

toward truth, as would his own—and not according to "mimic Fancy," who tries to "imitate" reason but, "misjoining shapes, / Wild work produces oft and most in dreams" (5.112). Slippery language leads people not toward truth, but toward confusion.[21] While on the surface this line seems to communicate praise, and certainly does—I believe Milton's high estimation of Shakespeare's talent was genuine—by a sort of double-speak Milton cleverly manages to sneak a quick and humorous jab at Shakespeare, as if to say he has the bard has misused his generous natural talent.

Line 9-10. For whilst to th'shame of slow endeavoring art,
Thy easy numbers flow, and that each heart

Here Milton may be admitting Shakespeare's undeniable aesthetic appeal, though we need not assume he attaches any particular value to the ability to write poetry quickly or easily. He is also probably responding to Heminge and Condell's message *To the Great Variety of Readers* that adorned the First Folio, wherein they had moreover contributed to the deification of Shakespeare by implying that he had superhuman abilities in such excess that he did not even need to revise, for "scarcely have we received a blot in his papers," indeed his "hand and his eye went together." When Milton seems to acknowledge this notion that Shakespeare wrote swiftly and without much revision, readers have usually noted in it a concession of Shakespeare's talents—and, at least in part, it must be. Perhaps we are catching a glimpse of Milton's anxieties about the greatness of the writer he sought to challenge, not only in popularity but in his abilities as

[21] Note the Shakespearean quality of these lines in *Paradise Lost*, which have often been pointed out as a reference to Theseus' speech about poets and their "shaping fantasies" in *A Midsummer Night's Dream.*

a writer. Shakespeare had displayed a very raw talent and everyone knew it. For Milton, though, Shakespeare's high level of talent was hardly a redeeming quality; Milton often cited the Parable of the Talents in *Matthew* 2, when Jesus tells that

> he which received the one talent came and said, Lord, I knew thee that thou art an hard man, reaping where thou hast not sown, and gathering where thou hast not strawed: And I was afraid, and went and hid thy talent in the earth: lo, there thou hast that is thine. His lord answered and said unto him, Thou wicked and slothful servant, thou knewest that I reap where I sewed not, and gather where I have not strawed: Thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the exchangers, and then at my coming I should have received mine own with usury. (*Matt*. 25:24-27)

Although in this passage "talents" refers to money, Milton is fond of using it in other ways—it is perfectly suitable to his intellectual talents, for example—since the lesson implies that when God bestows gifts upon men, he expects wise investment of those gifts and, later, gains in return. If Milton thought Shakespeare was gifted, which we can be sure enough that he did, then he probably thought that Shakespeare was like the sinful servant in this passage, having neglected to use that talent for furthering God's cause of true religion, putting it instead to misuse. Perhaps the metaphor is not fully apt, as it might seem wrong to say that Shakespeare hid his talent in the earth, but it would be no stretch to imagine Milton perceiving Shakespeare's theatrical, money-making enterprise as an *earthly* misuse of his talent, which should have been put to heavenly cause; in this case, quite the contrary, it is a perfect metaphor.

Line 11. Hath from the leaves of thy unvalued book

The pivotal word in line 11 is "unvalued." Most scholars have assumed its equivalence to the word "priceless," meaning of limitless value, but Milton knew it

would work equivocally. In early modern English it could also mean "worthless," or "useless," reflective of the problem Milton saw with Shakespeare's poetry.[22] In fact, this is the sense in which Shakespeare employs the word when he puts it into the mouth of Laertes, who warns his sister that the prince cannot "carve for himself" as "unvalued" people do (*Ham* 1.3.19-20). Milton "praises" Shakespeare, however ironically, smuggling in a cleverly insulting appraisal of the dead poet's work through language that can be taken as the reader wills.

Line 12. Those Delphic lines with deep impression took

In this line, most scholars agree with Barbara Lewalski's thinking, which reads "Delphic" as equivalent to "inspired," but it need not necessarily mean anything more than simply poetic (41). Even if we read into "Delphic" some type of external inspiration, Milton would not have placed a pagan muse on the same level as a heavenly, Christian one. This is largely the point of the Nativity Ode, where Milton displaces the authority of pagan gods and, by extension, pagan poets, making way for a Christian god with higher authority, a universal scheme in which the god of poetry is no longer Apollo, but Jesus. Anthony Walsh notes that throughout his career Milton was anxious about his sizeable debt to a pagan literary heritage and sought to extricate himself from it. It seems the same is true for his debt to Shakespeare, and here we see Milton grouping Shakespeare in with that pre-Christian, pagan literary tradition that he so laid to rest in his birth poem.

Line 13-14. Then thou our fancy of itself bereaving,
Dost make us marble with too much conceiving;

[22] Note the language of "usefulness" and "usury."

The first of these two may be the most enigmatic or, perhaps, just plain confusing lines in the poem. What does it mean that our fancy would be taken away from itself? In the original version published in F2, Milton gave "our fancy" a feminine pronoun: "then thou our fancy of herself bereaving." Why might Milton have de-feminized the pronoun here and changed it to a thing? It is a mystery. But put together with the following line, it makes more sense: our imagination is stolen away from itself as we "marble with too much conceiving." In other words, our imaginations are emptied out and filled with the contents of Shakespeare's fancy when we turn to "marble," like statues, dumbly experiencing Shakespeare's weightless world, blissfully enamored with the gorgeous songs of an Ariel or Feste, in a state of "wonder" and "astonishment." Here we must be careful to notice the obvious pun on "marble," both the material from which fancy gravestones are made and a verb meaning "to turn a person marble," or to become marble oneself. Thomas Heywood uses the word in this sense in 1632, in *Iron Age*, writing of Orestes, "Who as if *marbled* by Medusaes head, Hath not one teare to fall, or sigh to spend" (2.4.1, italics mine). Not usually known for his wordplay, at this young age Milton still engaged it more than scholar's tend to assume or else his peers would not have invited him to preside over the commencement assembly at Christ's College during the summer of 1628. This audience expected boisterous laughs, the occasion was meant to be educational but also a lot of fun, and they knew Milton could give it to them. This error of assuming he was always so serious perhaps owes to the misinformed image of Milton as a sour old Puritan, fueled during the last half of the last century by Stanley Fish, that until only recently muddied the waters of Milton scholarship. At any rate, it

makes sense that Milton, especially in his youth, would pun in his poem on Shakespeare; the subject's works were full of such antic wordplay.

Speaking of antic wordplay, as readers behold the work of Shakespeare in wonder and awe, they themselves become his monuments, frozen in place like the fallen angels of *Paradise Lost*—or fixed to the enchanted chair like the Lady of *Comus*—as they "marble with too much conceiving."[23] If we read a pun on "conceiving," we might detect a suggestion here whereby Milton criticizes Shakespeare for filling his plays with too much sexual content; this constitutes, one would think, a major moral and aesthetic objection to Shakespeare for the young, chaste Milton. Chapter 2 argues that Milton cast Shakespeare himself as the tempter, an idea first set forth by John Guillory, in a stage play the point of which is to express and praise the powerful virtue of Chastity. As noted above, in the Preface to Book two of *Reason of Church Government*, Milton presumably if obliquely calls Shakespeare a "vulgar amorist," suggesting that Shakespeare's plays held our attention and, indeed, turned our brains into numb stones, as we stare at "too much conceiving," perhaps a pun meaning, "too much sex" on the stage.

Line 15. And so sepulchered in such pomp dost lie
That kings for such a tomb would wish to die.

The concluding couplet points out, one last time, that Shakespeare already has his physical monument and that, moreover, it is a monument more fancy than he merits. Even kings would "wish to die" to be enclosed in such a glorious tomb, to be "sepulchered in such pomp." As noted, "pomp" had a negative connotation during the

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[23] The idea of the Lady stuck in the chair as she listens to Comus might be analogous to Milton stuck in a chair with F1 in his lap.

Renaissance, and particularly for Christians, as it signified vainglory; not "real," heavenly glory, which for Milton is eternal, but an earthly glory, which is temporary, and amounts only to worldly renown in the eyes of one's peers. Not only does this mystical poet obliquely suggest a negative answer to the question of whether or not to build another monument to Shakespeare, he suggests that we have perhaps overdone it already. Also we can read the double meaning in "pomp dost lie," in the sense that Milton believed such pomp is dishonest and false. The final line completes the sarcastic gesture begun in the previous one: Shakespeare's tomb is so fancy that if kings knew they were going to be commemorated in such fashion they would be eager to greet death. In sum, Milton's poem in praise of Shakespeare ironically challenges the notion of Shakespeare-praise, undeniably acknowledging his greatness but at the same time pulling back: Milton was willing to concede that Shakespeare's inborn talent was great. But in paying the late bard the credit that was surely his due, Milton made sure not to overdo it.

Conclusion: Milton's Late Becoming

> And if it happen as I did forecast
> The daintiest dishes shall be served up last.
> (Milton, *At a Vacation Exercise* 13-14)

At what point did Milton 'become' Milton? Engaging this question as a point of departure, this conclusion will elaborate key points of Milton's biography after the 1630's that, while they are in no way exhaustive and in no way intend to be, represent major biographical landmarks along his way that most contributed to his becoming the figure he would become. Taking a broad overview of Milton's life after returning from Italy in 1641, this conclusion hopes to render as circumspect an answer as possible to this question of whether Milton achieved his high poetic aspirations and, if so, when? While the longer answer will be the subject of the conclusion, the shorter answer is: late.

Scholars have long noted the sense of self-conscious belatedness that permeates Milton's work; for having announced his high poetic ambitions so early in life, Milton did not actually start making the literary contributions that would gain his perpetual fame, or even take up a career like the rest of his peers, until quite late. When he was but twenty-four, having finished his seven years at college, Milton refused to join the church ministry—the career path he had been expected to take—considered and likewise decided against a career in law, and instead returned home to live with his parents at Hammersmith. David Masson noted that until Milton "was thirty-two years of age, or perhaps some years older, he did not earn a penny for himself" (104). Three years later,

the family moved further into the country to Horton, and at these homes he would enjoy a long period of "studious retirement": throughout the 1630's, Milton endeavored to further develop his already-impressive education through self-directed practice in reading and writing, which he framed as essential to achieving the poetic task that he took to be his lot in life. During this time he spent living at the home of his adoring mother and father, we must imagine the young Milton was ever conscious of that "only one thing" that "a little troubled the elderly people and particularly the father . . . their son was back on their hands, with no clear line of life before him, such as other young men had, but buried in books and lost in poetry" (104).

Ad Patrem ('To My Father'), likely written sometime during the 1630's, evinces that at the Milton home there was some friction between father and son concerning the latter's career choice, or apparent lack thereof. As Lewalski notes, "no seventeenth century gentleman could imagine making a career, much less a living, as a poet" (53). This may have been true, for the most part, however it may not have been quite the stretch it would be today. In the case of Ben Jonson, the office of Poet Laureate had been "converted into something more definite and substantial than it had been before. Before his appointment, a pension of a hundred marks a year had been conferred on him by James. This pension had come to be regarded as his official income in the laureateship, and . . . had been raised to a hundred pounds by Charles in 1630" (Masson, 1:432). Whether Milton knew this, we cannot tell, but he must have known there were some Englishmen who had made their living as poets. Ever rebellious, the young Milton insisted on his calling. In the Latin verses he dedicated to his father, Milton emphasized

that his poetic pursuits were simply a part of his nature: "it was my lot in life to have been born a poet" (71); and indeed, poetry was "holy work" (61). It was another way of joining the clergy. Why else would God have instilled in him such remarkable poetic abilities? Not to use his gifts in the service of the bestower would have been to invite the same fate as the worker who buried his talents in the earth.[1] For Milton, being a poet followed from his determination to obey, above all, what he perceived to be the will of his heavenly father, and in these verses he gave profuse thanks to his early father for the education he had provided, making his son's literary service possible. For the young Milton, bent on utilizing his poetic abilities in the service of his nation and his God, it would not matter what anyone thought or said to the contrary. Remarking often upon the kindness and cooperation of the elder Milton, the poet's great enabler, Masson explains it thus: the younger "Milton, I fancy, had learned to be master and more in his father's house" (1:463).

In *Letter to a Friend* (1633), Milton responded to someone who had just the previous day, in person, criticized his late professional beginning. More specifically, the friend had criticized Milton's refusal to take holy orders, and this letter contained the aspiring poet's self-defense against accusations of being sidetracked by a "mere love of learning."[2] William Riley Parker notes that Milton had "evidently [done] a poor job of explaining himself" (122) the day prior, then went home and composed a forceful, multi-

[1] The Parable of the Talents is the subject of *Matthew* 25:14-30.

[2] We do not know to whom it was that Milton addressed this letter. In their biography of Milton, Gordon Campbell and Thomas N. Corns note that the friend "seems to be older than Milton, and may be in holy orders; Milton had visited him the previous day, so he is likely to be based in London rather than Cambridge. Thomas Young might be a candidate, but Milton normally wrote to him in Latin" (401). William Riley Parker observed that it could have been John Lawson, rector of All Hallows. (783)

faceted argument based on his own creative interpretations of scripture. For example, Milton cites the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard, wherein the "goodman of the house" hires various people, whom he finds "standing idle," to go to work for him. He begins hiring them at 9:00 in the morning, and continues hiring new workers throughout the day. Promising them all the same amount, at the end of the day he pays them all the same, and since the workers who arrived at the eleventh hour receive the same payment as the workers who started early—a Christian metaphor for those who convert to Christianity late in their lives, perhaps even just before death—the workers who started earlier complained, "Saying, These last have wrought but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, which have borne the burden and heat of the day" (*Matt.* 20:12).[3] The lesson it will teach is that they should not complain but, rather, trust and give thanks to God, who compensated them all exactly as they had been promised. Their very employment was an act of grace. The passage in scripture ends on something of a cryptic note, concluding that "the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen" (20:16). It seems the aspiring poet wanted to frame himself as the worker who arrives at the eleventh hour; according to the parable, arriving last would somehow make him "first," something that would likely have pleased Milton. In his letter the young poet conceded his tardiness in beginning, and argued that just because he had not joined the clergy, that did not mean he had failed to follow God's will, or that he was not working. The young poet's version of Christ's New Testament parable is extraordinary, and adds

[3] The Parable of the Vineyard Workers is the subject matter of *Matthew* 20:1-16.

this point not present in scripture: while the workers the "goodman" hires in *Matthew* are always found standing idle, Milton was anything but.

The aspiring poet was already hard at work. After conceding the point of his late start, "that you may see that I am something suspicious of myself, and do take notice of a certain belatedness in me," the poet evinced that he had been keeping busy by enclosing two poems, "On Time," and a Petrarchan sonnet—*Sonnet 7*—to help illuminate that which he found more difficult to express in prose:

> Yet be it less or more, or soon or slow
> It shall be in strictest measure e'en
> To that same lot, however mean, or high
> Towards which Time leads me, and the will of Heav'n. (9-12)[4]

After laying the foundation for his argument upon versus of scripture, and driving home his point in prose, Milton's verses announce that his "late spring" shall not displease his "great Taskmaster," that whether it happens "soon or slow," now or later, just like the workers in the vineyard who began at the eleventh hour were paid "in strictest measure e'en," so too would Milton's reward come in proportion not to the amount of time he seemed to be at work, but to God's promise. Assured by scripture that the "last shall be first," Milton expressed an honest recognition for his "belatedness," and made an energetic argument explaining why being late suited him just fine.

[4] All of Milton's sonnets were written after the Petrarchan fashion, also known as the "Italian" sonnet, composed of two octaves and a sestet, as opposed to that which was made famous by Shakespeare, also known as the "English" sonnet, composed of three quatrains and a couplet. It is telling, I think, that when Milton wrote sonnets he avoided the style of Shakespeare's, and there may be, again, something of a "swerve" in this. Moreover, in Milton's sonnets he represents a "dark lady" of his own, but in quite a different way than Shakespeare.

Milton may have dealt more respectfully with his father's resistance than with whatever friend it was to whom he addressed this letter. Gordon Campbell and Thomas N. Corns write that Milton "deflects the suggestion of time-wasting with mocking self-deprecation" (75), however I would depart from that reading and suggest the letter conveys more tension, however subtle. Toward the end, commenting on his own verses Milton's tone seems to become ironic and even threatening: "By this I believe you may well repent of having made mention at all of this matter, for if I have not won you to this, I have certainly wearied you to it" (*CPW* 1:321). That is to say, by now if you still disagree with me, then I have at least sufficiently worn you out with my tedious verses to make you sorry you brought it up. Of course, this could be intended as a joke. Or we could see in this letter the first signs of Milton's brusque contentiousness that will reach its zenith twenty years later in addresses to men like Salmasius and More. Of course, we have no evidence about the type of relationship Milton had with the addressee of this letter—whom, indeed, we cannot even identify—so we can only speculate. But the tedium through which Milton put his "friend," the author assures, would seem enough reason to leave him alone as it stands, "lest having thus tired you singly, I should deal worse with a whole congregation, and spoil all the patience of a parish" (*CPW* 1:321). Here Milton issues a subtle warning—a threat, even—that this had better be the last time he hears of the matter "lest" he should make the whole church wish they have left him be. Apparently Milton's point was well taken, for there is no trace of any further correspondence in this discussion. Already, before achieving anything that would earn him renown, Milton was a big talker; already he was in the habit of honoring the guiding

voice that came from within him, regardless of anything he heard coming from without, and if someone disagreed, he was not afraid to fight a battle with his pen.

Toward the end of the 1630's, Milton made his Italian sojourn to "see foreign parts," between 1638 and 1641, later claiming in *Defensio Secunda* (1654) that he had cut short his journey because "the sad tidings of civil war from England summoned me back," as he thought it "base" that he should be away while his countrymen were fighting for freedom (*CPW* 4:618-19). However, Campbell and Corns note that "for a man returning in haste Milton took an inordinately long time" (121) getting back. Milton eventually returned some time in 1642 and, just as Civil War started brewing and tensions between Parliament and King Charles were rising, he took up a teaching post and got married for the first time. His wife, Mary Powell, left him after only a month, and almost immediately he set to work on a set of divorce tracts that would earn his first real taste of public contumely.[5] According to Gordon Campbell, "Milton's life in the 1640's was divided between his duties as a teacher and his avocation as a polemicist involved in the controversy about church government and initiating a divorce" (29). It was at this point in Milton's life that he would begin to make his major political contributions, including the five "antiprelatical tracts," the divorce tracts, and *Areopagitica* (1644), his response—late again—to the licensing order of 1643, which had stipulated that all books had to be approved by a censor before publication.

[5] These are the *Doctrine of Discipline and Divorce, Judgment of Martin Bucer*, *Tetrachordon*, and *Colasterion*.

Campbell and Corns note that "life records are singularly sketchy for the period from the death of Milton's father in March 1647" (187), but it was around this time that the poet was commissioned by the Council of State to begin writing prose on behalf of the newly-formed Commonwealth, against the divine right of kings in general and the reign of Charles in particular. In *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1649), Milton argued vehemently against monarchy, in the name of the English people, asserting at the outset that "no man who knows aught can be so stupid as to deny that all men were naturally born free*"* *(CPW* 3:198)*,* and asserting that argument, as worded in the subtitle, that it is "Lawfull, and hath been held so through all Ages, for any, who have the Power, to call to account a Tyrant, or wicked King, and after due conviction, to expose, and put him to death, if the ordinary Magistrate have neglected, or deny'd to doe it" (*CPW* 3:197). Here it could be noted that Milton was late again, as he did not get *TKM* out for publication until two weeks after Charles had already been executed. This, of course, did not prevent the tract from making an impact, even in Milton's own time; certainly it would come back to haunt him later. [6] But if Milton had not attracted enough attention with his divorce tracts, he was surely gaining much greater renown by the end of the 1640's, leading up to the moment at which he would gain his first taste of international fame.

In May of 1649, according to Campbell's dating, scarcely one year since the new Republican government under Lord Protector Cromwell had quite unnerved European

[6] On *TKM* and the haunting that follows regicide in terms of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Gregory A. Foran's "*Macbeth* and the Political Uncanny in *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*" in *Milton Studies* 51 (2010): 1-20.

monarchies with the beheading of ousted Charles Stuart, copies of *Defensio Regia pro Carolo I* ("Defense of King Charles I") began to appear in England. It was written by an eminent French intellectual, Claudius Salmasius—the Latin *nom de plume* of Claude Saumaise—and mounted a defense of the lately executed monarch that posed a serious threat to the Commonwealth. A widely-respected professor and, at the time, scholar-in-residence at the Court of Queen Christina of Sweden, Salmasius "sounded a clarion call to the kings of Europe and to royalists in England" (Lewalski 248) to unite against a sinful, morally depraved republic that had just murdered its king, the image of God on earth. As Campbell notes, the council state counted it a "damaging book," as it "threatened to delay the resumption of normal trade relations with the continent" (53). In need of someone learned enough to make a strong reply, the English Council of State turned again to Milton. Against the advice of his physician—for by this time Milton was beginning to go blind—and considering it part of his own heaven-appointed duty, Milton responded with *Defensio Pro Populo* (1651), ("A Defense of the English People"). In what he would later describe as an attempt at "publicly defending (if anyone ever did) the cause of the English people and thus of Liberty herself" (*CPW* 4:549), in his first open letter to Salmasius, Milton berated his adversary, mixing sound argument with vicious personal attacks on everything from his writing skills or inferior Latin to his manhood, and in the name of the English people, thoroughly refuted the French scholar's argument before an international audience.[7] Isaac D'Israeli observed that "All Europe took part in

[7] In the *Second Defense*, Milton flung numerous ad hominem attacks at "Salmasius (or Salmasia, for which of the two he was, the open domination of his wife, both in public and in private, had made it quite difficult to determine)" (329). Reactions to the exchange were, of course, varied. Voltaire famously said that he

the paper-war of these two great men," a battle in which Milton "perfectly massacred Salmasius" (237).

It was a glorious victory for Milton. Until that point still relatively unknown, the poet—entirely blind by 1652—had stepped into the spotlight for the first time before all of Europe and delivered a resounding blow to his adversary who, incidentally, died while preparing a response. While Salmasius had claimed Milton's loss of eyesight represented God's just punishment for the poet's involvement in the odious crime of murdering a king, Milton claimed that his divinely empowered pen had literally destroyed Salmasius. Enjoying an opportunity to gloat, in his *Second Defense* Milton unabashedly reported his own victory:

> Lastly, I thank God that in an affair so arduous and so charged with expectation, I did not disappoint the hope or the judgment of my countrymen about me, nor fail to satisfy a host of foreigners, men of learning and experience, for by God's grace I so routed my audacious foe that he fled, broken in spirit and reputation. (*CPW* 4:549)

He may have taken his bragging a bit too far. Though he added that he wished to claim for himself "no share in this glory"—passing it along instead to his God, who had ordained the victory—it is yet difficult not to hear a bit of hubris, even echoes of his own prideful Satan in his self-congratulatory announcement: that upon his country's need for

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favored neither of the two, Salmasius nor Milton, as the former "attacks like a pedant," and the latter "responds like a wild beast" (49). I have harvested this quotation from François-René de Chateaubriand's *Sketches of English Literature; With Considerations on the Spirit of the Times, Men, and Revolutions.* Vol. 2. London: Henry Colburn, 1836.

someone to fight against Salmasius, "it was I and no other who was deemed equal to a foe of such repute" (*CPW* 4:549).[8] In *Paradise Regained*, Satan likewise boasts that

> I, when no other durst, sole undertook
> The dismal expedition to find out
> And ruin Adam, and the exploit performed
> Successfully. (1.100-03)

Ever the champion of radical individualism, Milton's Satan shares with his maker some definite temperamental affinities, most noticeably his rebellious refusal of authority, emphasis on radical individualism, and in the words of Milton's epic narrator, a certain longing to "set himself in Glory above his peers" (*PL* 1.39). Though, for Milton, the glory was not his own, but God's.

One might argue that Milton and his Satan share a certain tendency to shoot too high, like the classical "overreacher" character type, whose revival during the Elizabethan Age is largely credited to Christopher Marlowe.[9] As in the case of Faustus, for example, who wants to raise himself to the level of a god, or Tamburlaine, who seeks a similar albeit more naturalistic world domination, Milton's aspirations to become not a but *the* poet through whom *the* Almighty God speaks to his specially chosen people must seem to the rest of us little short of megalomania. But for whatever reason, Milton believed in his extra special status; for to be one of the chosen people was already to be special, but according to Milton's logic, he was the one chosen from among the special

[8] Campbell and Corns note that, in fact, this is not entirely true, as the Commonwealth first invited John Selden to perform the task of writing against Salmasius. Maybe Milton did not know; or maybe he did, and conveniently ignored the fact. We cannot be sure.

[9] See: Harry Levin's *The Overreacher: A Study of Christopher Marlowe.* London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1954.

people to be *the* poet. Perhaps this super-sized ambition contributed to the reason William Blake later remarked that Milton was "of the Devil's party without knowing it" (35). However, regardless of Milton's actual levels of pride or humility, in his moment of great triumph, he assured readers that he would accept none of the glory. Rather, he was passing it all along to his god, acknowledging that it was he who had empowered him, enabling his triumph. How much this caveat would offset Milton's heavy self-glorification would be up to each reader to decide. For in the early 1650's, Milton did express quite a lot of pride in his political and literary accomplishments, shamelessly glorifying himself while verbally passing the credit for his triumph along to his god. And it turned out to be true for Milton, as for his Satan, that pride goeth before a fall.

The turn of the 1660's brought with it a new world of crushing defeat for Milton and his Puritan contemporaries. Hardly effectual in the grand scheme of the war, Milton's victory over Salmasius seemed like a distant memory by the end of the decade. The English people were ready for another king, and Charles II reclaimed the throne for the royal House of Stuart, and immediately went about punishing those who had supported the crown's overthrow. Many of Milton's comrades were executed, and Milton himself was imprisoned for three months, lucky to escape the gallows.[10] By the time he composed his late masterpieces, Milton's former glorious state had taken on an entirely new look: financially ruined, politically defeated, his reputation in shambles, constantly in fear of

[10] It is remarkable that Milton was allowed to live, since the reinstated royalist forces had dealt so harshly with his comrades. Shortly after taking the throne, Charles II ordered men to exhume the corpses of regicides Oliver Cromwell, John Bradshaw, and Henry Ireton, in order to stage a "posthumous execution," chopping off their lifeless heads, which would adorn Westminster Hall for a quarter century.

assassination, and deprived the use of his eyes, Milton went into hiding, and it was then he would finally compose the bulk of his great epic, *Paradise Lost*.

Reflecting Milton's enduring concern with belatedness, the words of his epic narrator announce at the beginning of Book IX—the section dealing directly with the actual fall—that the subject "pleased me long choosing, and beginning late" (9.26).

It was true that, in many ways, it was almost too late to write *Paradise Lost.* In Milton's famous discussion of literary forms in the Preface to Book II of *The Reason of Church Government* (1642), Milton pondered whether dramatic poetry can be "doctrinal and exemplary to a nation" (*CPW* 1:815),[11] but by the time he came around to producing the great work he had so long envisioned, the defeat of the Republican government had obviated any political impact he may have wished for. Perhaps even more troubling still, as readers have long pointed out, the failed rebellion of Satan's rebel angels—which makes up the subject matter of books one and two—a bit too closely resembles the failed rebellion of Milton and his Puritan allies. But these were apparently not the greatest of Milton's concerns. While hangmen threw copies of *Eikonoklastes* and *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* into the fires, the poet's enemies claimed, as had Salmasius, that Milton's blindness represented God's just punishment for lifting his hand against Charles—everyone take note of what happens when you murder a king. And yet, somehow, remarkably, the mature Milton kept enough distance from the desolation in his social life to compose the greatest long poem in English, or quite possibly any language.

[11] At this early point, Milton still had not decided that epic would be the form of his greatest poem, as his Trinity College manuscript shows he was imagining plans for a tragedy about the fall, entitled *Adam Unparadis'd* or, as he would someday choose for his epic, *Paradise Lost.*

It is here, at the eleventh hour, having already achieved international fame for fighting on behalf of the religious cause that he believed in, during the production of *Paradise Lost*, that Milton is finally Milton.

Presenting himself as the blind seer, a mystical and prophetic poet, Milton's epic speaker briefly rues his loss of earthly, visual beauties—such as the "sight of vernal bloom, or summer's rose, / Or flocks or herds or human face divine" (3.43-44)—however frames it as an ultimately positive metamorphosis:

> So much the rather thou celestial light
> Shine inward, and the mind through all her powers
> Irradiate, there plant eyes, all mist from thence
> Purge and dispurse, that I may see and tell
> Of things invisible to mortal sight. (3.51-55)

Not only does Milton accept his physical impairment with grace, he even turns it around and frames it to his advantage. Asking the muse to "plant eyes" in his "mind," Milton suggests that his blindness has given way to a higher, more potent type of vision, enabling him to see "things invisible to mortal sight" (3.55). The fact of the poet's blindness well adorns the self-spun "poet/prophet" narrative of his life. This is the same poet who, at the age of 19, had foretold in *At A Vacation Exercise* that someday, writing of "some graver subject," his "deep transported mind" would soar "Above the wheeling poles, and at heaven's door / Look in" (30-35). By the time he composed his great epic—some 33 years later—he did not hesitate to employ such mystical metaphors concerning his status as a chosen, divinely inspired prophet: his blindness was no scourge of God, but a gift; it was no weakness, but a strength; his vision was not impaired, it was

increased. Enumerating other blind "seers" for the purpose of comparison, such as "Blind Thamyris and Blind Maeonides, / And Tiresias and Phineus prophets old" (3.35-36), Milton employed this technique known as an "epic catalog" to facilitate a hyperbolic description of his own pre-eminent poetic status. In his great epic Milton frequently uses these catalogs when he wished to describe something of a magnitude far beyond that which his reader has ever yet conceived. For example, he describes the size of Satan's body by comparing it to various mythical bodies of gargantuan proportions:

> in bulk as huge
> As whom the fables name of monstrous size,
> Titanian, or Earth-born, that warred on Jove,
> Briareos or Typhon, whom the den
> By ancient Tarsus held, or that sea beast
> Leviathan, which God of all his works
> Created hugest that swim th' ocean stream:
> Him haply slumb'ring on the Norway foam
> The pilot of some small night-foundered skiff,
> Deeming some island, oft, as seamen tell,
> With fixèd anchor in his scaly rind. (1.196-206)

Milton compares the enormous body of Satan to all the largest things he can think of in order to stress Satan's colossal size, like a sea creature so big as to be mistakable for land, seamen believing he is "some island," leading them to throw their anchor into his scaly back. Likewise, with his catalog of other blind seers, Milton wishes to emphasize—some will think even overstate—his own historical significance as the greatest of poets. For Milton was announcing intentions to soar high above even the likes of a Homer or Tiresias, the blind sage from *Oedipus Rex*, to achieve the status of "first" among *vates* poets, even if it required what seems like an impossible leap backwards in time.

As in the Nativity Ode, when the young Milton's speaker makes the seemingly anachronistic request for the muse to "prevent" the magi, which would enable Milton to offer his own gift to the newly born Christ before the wise men arrived with theirs, *Paradise Lost* begins with an invocation that emphasizes a litany of firsts in what John Rogers has called Milton's attempt to achieve an "impossible firstness:"

> Of man's *first* disobedience and the fruit
> Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste
> Brought death into the world and all our woe,
> With loss of Eden, till one greater man
> Restore us, and regain that blissful seat,
> Sing heav'nly muse, that on the secret top
> Of Oreb, or of Sinai, didst inspire
> That shepherd, who *first* taught the chosen seed,
> In the beginning how the heavens and earth
> Rose out of Chaos: or if Sion hill
> Delight thee more, and Siloa's brook that flowed
> Fast by the oracld of God, I thence
> Invoke thy aid to my adventurous song,
> That with no middle flight intends to soar
> Above th'Aonian mount, while it pursues
> Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme.
> And chiefly though, O Spirit, that dost prefer
> Before all temples th'upright heart and pure,
> Instruct me, for thou know'st; thou from the *first*
> Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread
> Dove-like sat'st brooding on the vast abyss
> And mad'st it pregnant. (1.1-22; italics mine)

Milton wants to come *before* Homer, *before* Virgil—let alone Shakespeare. Should someone object that chronology will not allow it, as times moves only in one direction, Milton would characteristically refuse to bow down to such tyranny; indeed, "holy song," as worded in the Nativity Ode, has the power to make "time run back." Heaven-inspired

verses sung by God's chosen poet are not bound by the same constraints as the verses of ordinary men. Thus in the first twenty-two lines of *Paradise Lost*, Milton furnishes a collection of firsts: his subject, man's "first disobedience," the shepherd, Moses, who first ministered to God's chosen people, how the earth was created—how it first rose of Chaos—the present poem will be the first to pursue things "unattempted yet in prose or rhyme" (1.16)—and finally Milton avers that the spirit to whom he prays for invocation "from the first / Wast present" (1.19-20). In other words, the spirit that would inspire Milton's poem was the very spirit through which—or perhaps whom—Milton believed his God had created the universe.[12] Blind, defeated by his enemies, a fugitive from the law and no longer politically relevant (except as recipient of vituperative attention), the mature Milton infused his epic with the biggest, boldest claims of his life. He was not simply God's selected poet/prophet for the chosen people of England, but indeed for all the world.

Always a fighter, in his last days Milton was fighting still, though I do not believe he was still focused on contending with Shakespeare, whom he had battled during the 1630's. And he was no longer fighting royalists, either, as the reformation and crowning of Charles II had proven definitive; English monarchy was back for good. If he was fighting anyone throughout the 1660's—and he certainly was, as Milton believed we live in a Universe characterized by constant engagement in spiritual warfare—into his final decade Milton was mostly battling Thomas Hobbes. *Leviathan* (1651) had declared

[12] In *De doctrina christiana* ("Of Christian Doctrine"), Milton's Latin prose treatise elaborating his interpretation of biblical Christianity, Milton stressed that the scripture says little to nothing about the Holy Spirit, thus leaving it a mystery about which nothing can be known, save that it exists and assists in doing the work of God.

that the very notion of divinely inspired poetry was nonsense, and that to use the term "spirit" in the way that Milton had was an "abuse of language." Offering a far more mechanical metaphysics, in the Introduction Hobbes claimed that "life is but a motion of limbs" (3). We do not know whether Milton read Hobbes—or whether he had it read to him, if after 1652—but the philosopher was so well known as to be the chief intellectual celebrity in the England of Milton's latter days. An engaging study waits to be undertaken concerning Hobbes' language of "motion," and the peculiar ways of knowing as Milton expressed in Milton's late poetry, specifically *Samson Agonistes*, wherein Samson describes his reception of an unmistakable divine prompting as a "motion": "what I motion'd was of God, I knew / By intimate impulse" *(SA* 222-23). By the time Milton set to work on his late verses, *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes*, he was less concerned with battling royalists or church leaders, more concerned with his philosophical contemporaries, particularly Hobbes.[13]

While Shakespeare had exercised his influence on Milton far more prominently in his successor's youth than in maturity, the great playwright influenced Milton's later work in two major ways: the verse form—blank verse had been used to great dramatic effect by Shakespeare, and Milton wanted to appropriate this powerful appeal for himself—and in the creation of Satan, Milton's depiction of the psychology of evil. Characters such as Iago, Richard III, and Edmund among others have all furnished

[13] In *Brief Lives*, John Aubrey writes that Milton's "widow assures me that Mr. T. Hobbes was not one of his acquaintance, that her husband did not like him at all, but he would acknowledge him to be a man of great parts, and a learned man; their interests and tenets did run counter to each other" (72).

Milton with specific psychologies of evil, ready made to plunder for the creation of Milton's great villain, the very personification of evil, the arch-enemy of all mankind. Further study of the ways Shakespearean influence persisted into Milton's maturity might consider ways the language of Shakespearean villains such as Iago, Richard, or Edmund inform Milton's creation of personified evil in the form of Satan. Or further study might consider the ways that Milton's fascination with Shakespeare's spiritual beings found expression in *Paradise Lost*. For if there is any one thing about the relation between these two authors that we can know for certain, it is that Milton was struck by the greatness, the magnitude of Shakespeare's literary power, and wanted to attain it for himself.

If we imagine a young Milton reading the ghost scene in *Hamlet*, we must imagine the young poet was moved by the notion that telling a story, unfolding a narrative tale, could have the power to work dramatic effects on the listener in actual, physical ways. In one of the most electrifyingly spooky scenes in all of English letters, the spirit of the dead King Hamlet ensures his son that were he not "forbid"

> To tell the secrets of my prison-house
> I could a tale unfold whose lightest word
> Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,
> Make thy two eyes like stars start from their spheres,
> Thy knotted and combined locks to part
> And each particular hair to stand on end
> Like quills upon the fearful porpentine. (*Ham* 1.5.14-20)

If the dead Hamlet were to unfold his narrative about purgatory, it would work direct, physical effects on the living Hamlet's body; indeed, it would be a tale so grave that its "lightest" word would "harrow up" the prince's soul. A "harrow" is a farm implement

used to uproot a bush or tree, violently ripping it from the earth; there is simply no other way to remove something so rooted. In other words, the expired king's speech suggests that language can have the power to uproot souls, to rip them free from that to which they cling, indeed, to separate them from that from which they have grown. During this famous speech, the spirit speaks some incredibly potent and memorable lines about the power of a story to work physical effects on the listener: if he could tell his son the story (that gains all the more mystique by not being told), it would make Hamlet's blood freeze and his eyes pop out of their sockets, as well as part his hair, and make it stand straight on end. Perhaps this ghastly apparition in *Hamlet* had even been spooky enough to quicken Milton's own pulse, to raise his own hair a bit. For the young poet wanted to absorb this unusual poetic power, which finds expression in *Paradise Lost*, as well as *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes.*

As to whether Milton achieved the high poetic achievements to which he aspired, it is impossible to know, and up to each individual reader to decide. For William Wordsworth, whose "London, 1802" calls out to him in an apostrophe: "Milton, thou shouldst be living at this hour: / England hath need of thee" (1-2), it seems Milton did become, at least to Wordsworth, the official poet of England, particularly with regard to taking political action. For Wordsworth claims the English people around the turn of the nineteenth century need Milton because England is a "fen / Of stagnant waters: altar, sword, and pen" (2-3). Indeed, almost as much as he will be remembered for his greatest poetic achievements, Milton will be remembered for the political battles he fought in the name of freedom and the English people. Perhaps this is not exactly what Milton had in

mind at age 19 when he was dreaming of being the English *vates*, particularly since despite winning a few battles his side lost the war. He certainly seems to have believed, nevertheless, that when he took on these assignments he was working according to his divinely appointed duty. However, historically speaking, for a poet to make the type of claims Milton made in his youth—claims to divine inspiration, making him a prophetic *vates* poet—born over 60 years after the onset of the Scientific Revolution, he simply lived a bit too late. In an alternative, perhaps more cool-headed answer to the question of whether Milton achieved that to which he aspired, Samuel Taylor Coleridge puts it beautifully and honestly:

> [Milton] was, as every truly great poet has ever been, a good man; but finding it impossible to realize his own aspirations, either in religion or politics, or society, he gave up his heart to the living spirit and light within him, and avenged himself on the world by enriching it with this record of his own transcendent ideal. (288)

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